What Babasaheb Ambedkar Means to Me

~Ambedkar Age Collective

THE SHARED MIRROR

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Published by

THE SHARED MIRROR

The Shared Mirror Publishing House shall endeavour to promote Dalit Bahujan literature and writers. It takes inspiration from the publishing efforts of anti-caste visionaries like Phule, Iyothee Thass, Babasaheb Ambedkar, Periyar and others.

It aims to further the anti-caste discourse, following the course set by *Round Table India,* the Dalit Bahujan information portal, through publishing poetry, fiction and non-fiction. It is driven by a sincere desire to radically expand the horizons of Indian writing in English and other languages by providing a platform to a wide range of marginalized voices across the sub-continent.

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Preface

In April 2016, to celebrate the 125th Birthday of Babasaheb Ambedkar, Round Table India and Savari asked readers to share with us what he meant to them. Several people responded in what can only be a testament to the relevance of his thoughts, a good sixty years after his passing away. To be able to compile the views of individuals at various stations of life inspired by Babasaheb is a matter of joy and pride.

This is our purposeful and responsive pursuit to articulate and place truths, struggles and express our creative spirit in autonomous spaces such as Round Table India, Savari and The Shared Mirror during this time in history. We remind ourselves that these works of knowledge production are firmly rooted in our collective efforts at learning, educating, motivating and agitating our communities. We know that we will continue to find the courage to face the necessary tensions that come our way in our pursuit of liberatory paths. We will continue to critically engage and invest in examining, owning and developing personal, as well as collective narratives that interrogate the anti-social system of caste and its informing of graded social conditioning, inequalities and divides. Babasaheb's writings will continue to uplift and empower us to work towards annihilating caste and bringing about social equality.

Babasaheb is among the very few individuals in history who can claim to have inspired masses and generations of oppressed people to devote themselves to redefining who they are. He has provided language, definitions, righteously disruptive truths, passion and shared purpose to examine, counter and obliterate caste and religious hegemony - and the authors in this book draw from him. This book is divided into five sections, by no means rigid compartments, but sections with significant overlap of thoughts and ideas. The authors come from various locations and as such, what Babasaheb means to them takes on uniquely personal tones. The writings showcase him as an inspiration, thinker,

revolutionary, guide, mentor, loving parent and more. The authors examine myriad aspects of his work as a lawmaker, champion of rights and an advocate for equality of all people. Individuals who advance his work are fondly remembered and appear in these pages. Events that reveal attempts at appropriating Babasaheb are clearly discussed. This book is also an audacious statement that anti-caste thought is flourishing and our leaders stand tall as we unapologetically declare the accuracies of our histories and now.

The richness of the articles validates that when Babasaheb Ambedkar put his genius to the service of the oppressed, the oppressed reciprocated by disallowing his deliberate erasure by the state apparatuses. The genius of the oppressed is in venerating him and acclaiming that his vision of humanity reverberates with them. This book is a responsible affirmation and cognizant memorialization that unflinchingly resists both elision and appropriation of Babasaheb.

In the end, this book is about universal values, seen through Babasaheb's wisdom and its resonance in ordinary people's lives. The cultural grounding for this book has a fundamental provenance to the sub continental land mass, but this is not just about the caste society or an Asian experience. It is relevant to everyone.

Jai Bhim!

Sruthi Herbert, Chetana Sawai, Gurinder Azad

Call for articles: What Babasaheb Ambedkar Means To Me

Round Table India

Celebrating Babasaheb's life and achievements needs no particular occasion. He has emerged as a consciousness, a moral anchor for the masses. A musical tradition of rendering his life events from birth onwards, winding through Mahad, Poona Pact, Kalaram Mandir, Round Table conferences, the constitution itself, the conversion and Mahaparinirvana was the foremost in the archiving of Babasaheb's memory and multiple legacies. This people's music in turn inspired artists, painters, writers and sculptors resulting in a vibrant visual rendering by people historians--men, women, young and old, who weave a tapestry of universal values of justice, equality, liberty and fraternity.

In a society that excludes at every turn, the excluded have claimed the public sphere with the physical shape of a bust or statue of Babasaheb. Can we even begin to fathom the processes that lead to seeing this physical manifestation of Babasaheb's consciousness at narrow street corners and busy market places? Someone or some few people took the time and generated resources to conceive of him in that spot and in million other similar spots across the country.

Who are they? What motivated them, how did they design it, who did they consult, how long did it take to complete, how did they feel upon its completion? How are they ensuring it continues to exist, in the absence of any kind of patronage? We would also need to ask another question -- Why were the statues non-existent in those spaces before that someone or group conceived and executed it? Was the statue's acceptance in that specific public sphere anticipated, or was conflict precipitated?

Who are these unnamed persons who seemed to have worked on a memorialization project so vast, so varied, so widely distributed that nothing comes to mind to draw a parallel of such a people's endeavour. *Let us celebrate them*!

It is said, 'history existed once as event and now as text.' What happens when history is both an event and a text simultaneously? And is compounded by the fact that these events and the texts are both rooted in the rights of the oppressed, staking out a vision to dismantle all hegemonies? How does this history which is antagonistic to the elites – the history writers themselves – evade erasure, disappearance and appropriation?

Who are those unknown publishers, book distributors, public servants who aligned their public service spirit in disparate spaces, languages and modes to collate and disseminate Babasaheb Ambedkar's textual legacy? Why did they work so tirelessly to ensure that the oppressed, the fighters of injustice have access to the textual legacy of Babasaheb's thoughts, extend its reach far and wide, in the complete absence of pedagogy and mainstream apparatuses of dissemination? Let us honour this fantastic feat.

In a recent lecture, G Aloysius says, *"if you want to describe Ambedkar's life in a single word: Ambedkar was a democrat. Democrat as in the fullest sense of the word. And till the end he tried to be a democrat. You can find fault with him for many other little things, but he has been a democrat throughout. And for him democracy means dismantling caste and dismantling caste is the first step. He doesn't stop with that. But that first step is nowhere near, in fact we are going back."*

This 125th anniversary, in the act of remembering Babasaheb Ambedkar, let us commit ourselves to the principles and ideals he valued and stood for, and fully embrace our roles in annihilating caste to create the foundation of a humane society. Let us celebrate his legacy and join his followers as workers labouring for an equal world.

1

Ambedkar Jayanti: Celebrations and Resistance

I dare say 'I am Ambedkar.'

Swati Kamble

I met Babasaheb for the very first time probably in my mother's womb. Making such a lofty claim in naive vanity is not what I wish to do here. In fact, I am aware that I am certainly not the only one to have felt such an early connection with Babasaheb. So, what I wish to emphasize with pride is that Babasaheb is passed on to its next generation from the time a baby is an embryo through the rich oral tradition of my community. For me, growing up was about knowing the varied facets of Babasaheb's personality and through him, knowing myself.

As a child, I would often hear that he was a doctor who worked relentlessly to end one of the deadliest ailments of our society. It was enough for me to know that somebody who lived in the same precarious conditions as I did could become a doctor. For, becoming a doctor was my dream too! In my early years, knowing Babasaheb was all about his birth anniversary. Every year, 14th of April would be a magical day. Early in the morning, in the community, a big stereo sound system would start playing *soniyachi ugavali sakal, janmas aale bhim bal* (A golden dawn has broken as baby Bhima is born). On this day, father would not have to play tricks to wake us up. Even though we would have slept late from the previous night's running-around, pasting blue flags on strings to soak the community in blue, we would wake up early, imagining the golden morning and the birth of baby Bhimrao. In the morning, my attire would be a bright white frock, carefully kept only for three occasions: Babasaheb Jayanti, the Buddha Paurnima and the Mahaparinirvan divas at Chaityabhoomi. We would dance around the common yard where the shared water tap was. Our community of labourers and cotton mill workers housed fifty-six families, most of them from the Dalit-Bahujan background.

While my mother and other women busily washed clothes, and filled water from the tap, I would beg my mother to get me ready at the earliest. I would run to the garland maker to get garlands, candles and

incense sticks. Young boys of the community would clean the premises and sprinkle water on the ground. The fresh fragrance of watered earth, the songs on the stereo about the auspiciousness of the day, festive clatter of utensils getting hastily filled in the morning rush, the early washing of clothes and the sweet smell of puran poli…

Around 10:00 a.m. or so, women would gather in white sarees in the *pandal* and sit down. Due to the lack of space inside the *pandal* men would stand in a circle around the *pandal*. After paying homage to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha and the five precepts, we would recite a prayer praising Bhimaraj. This would be followed by speeches of the older women and men of the community. For years, an old soul of our community, Hira *aaji* (grandma Hira) would narrate the glorious days when, inspired by Dr Babasaheb, 'her people' (referring to the community of untouchables, Mahars, about whom the stories would mostly be) decided to revolt against caste injustices. Hira aaji would also narrate the horrendous stories of discrimination and stigma Dalits faced before Babasaheb revolted against it. She was proud to tell us that in her small village near Karjat, she was one among the very few girls from our community to have gone to school. Her family, inspired by Babasaheb's message, wanted their daughters to study! She would narrate how she was made to sit outside the school. She was also not allowed to drink water from the pot meant for all students. She told us that even though she would receive severe beating from the teacher, she still would attempt drinking water from the water pot during the school break and in her mischievous rebelliousness, spit into it. She would chuckle and say, 'Sitting next to us was polluting for them, may be my spit would not be as polluting.' At that young age her rebelliousness fascinated me as much as the social injustice affected me.

As a little girl, I could not grasp why my people did not have Right to drink water from common wells and facilities at schools. Little did I know then, that not much had improved. When the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) cut off water supply to our community, my mother and other women, although feeling embarrassed, would be forced to line up in front of the neighbouring apartment building to access water meant for maintaining their garden. The security guard

would humiliate them. I wondered how these buildings had water access while water taps in my *chawl* did not.

It was during those speeches that we first heard that mere touch of people from the lower castes was considered polluting. Also that past generations of my people having had faced these discriminatory practices. We were enchanted by stories of the Mahad Satyagrah and the Kalaram Mandir protest. The songs of Waman dada, Pralhad Shinde, and Vitthal Umap playing on stereo would narrate these as epics. I would experience all the emotions these songs conveyed, wondering what would have been the plight of my people if Babasaheb did not do what he did. The elders of the community too would emphasize that if it were not for Babasaheb's untiring efforts, we untouchables would still be enchained in slavery. Descriptions of the untouchable people's lives only a few generations ago, each forced to wear a long broom around his/her waist to wipe out their footprints and an earthen pot around their neck to spit in it, to not pollute the village premises by their touch made me shudder.

I was yet to fully grasp all that this one incredible man had done, not only for the downtrodden by introducing progressive laws but also for the entire nation, while facing dire consequences. We would later read about the Hindu Code Bill which, among other things, ensured property rights to Indian women. Babasaheb had to resign from Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's cabinet from his position as Law Minister because of the opposition to the Hindu code bill. From this, we get a sense of the difficulties Babasaheb must have faced in developing an inclusive legal system by framing the constitution in an inherently unequal society.

My grandfather told us his story, about how, inspired by Babasaheb's message, he left whip-lashing himself and begging for alms as a *potraj*. *Potraj* are devotees of goddesses Ambabai, called Mari-aai in western Maharashtra and Yellama in southern Maharashtra and Karnataka. This is a derogatory caste practice that continues to this day. A few untouchable castes are forced to follow this practice. The caste inferiority also enforced upon the untouchables, a god-fearing attitude.

Therefore, untouchables themselves would take upon worshipping the goddess fearful of her the wrath and of bringing bad luck for their families. *Potraj*, after devoting his life to the goddess must only perform the role of a devotee and beg for alms for survival. He would carry a small wooden temple of the goddess on his head and travel from village to village begging. They (*potraj)* grow their hair and if they have matted hair, which too would be worshipped. Matted hair is said to be a 'good omen' from the goddess. It is said that the goddess herself resides in them and therefore this hair must not be cut, but worshipped. An inhuman and superstitious caste practice, these customs kept many untouchables deprived of education and dignified occupation.

My grandfather told me that as a young man, he walked from his village in Satara pulling out his long over-grown matted hair, strand by strand, symbolizing the renunciation of the degrading religious practice that kept him enslaved. He was walking to attend a meeting of Dr Babasaheb. My grandfather became a staunch Ambedkarite, and he did not worship any Hindu gods ever since. These individual stories of courage to claim dignity and status as human beings were told remembering Babasaheb, whose thoughts had sown the seeds of change. What I learnt growing up is that the discrimination and stigma remained. However, the change was that my community did not accept the discrimination as their fate but spoke out against the injustice. Even when it led to horrific consequences! Burning of Dalit huts, and instances of desecrating Babasaheb's statues (mostly around 14th April and 6th December) were common occurrences that one would read about in newspapers.

For me, consciousness that caste is the ailment Babasaheb wanted to annihilate would sprout through personal experiences of the disease affecting my life. Initially, it would spring up only rarely, as we lived in a ghetto mostly populated by the Dalit-Bahujan. The discrimination amongst the Dalit Bahujan was subtler. The Matang community people were named *batage* (a derogatory term for Christian converts) by the Mahars. The 'progressive' Mahars who had stopped eating *motyach* (beef) looked down upon the Matang community who ate beef. There were regional disparities and stereotypes too to make the matters even more

complex. In the village during summer vacations, we would be allowed to play with the kids from Mali caste but if we crossed the street to go to play in what was called as *Matangachi chaal* (crowded tenements of Matang community) my grandmother would scold us in the evening.

Parents of school friends referred to the locality I lived in as *Maharanchi chaal* (Mahar community tenements). A 'progressive' lady, the mother of a friend from the Charmkar (Cobbler) community which is also an untouchable caste, boastfully said, 'We do not believe in caste, my daughter eats from Swati's (my) lunchbox.' 'Scheduled Caste' students would be asked to stand up in the classroom whenever an enquiry about scholarships came, to know how many of us there were eligible for the scholarship. Only Mahar and Matang students would stand up in the classroom forthright while students from other scheduled castes would hesitate. Even teachers called out only these two caste names. Up till my college years I thought Mahar and Matang communities were the only scheduled caste communities. We speculated as to which of our teachers at school were from our own caste. These teachers did not reveal their caste identity. Only a year ago, when I revisited my school, a teacher could not hold back her frustration and told me how a group of teachers from lower caste background kept their caste identity concealed from students, fearing they would face problems if they favoured students from the lower castes. These teachers would sometimes give even harsher treatment to the lower caste students. He said to me, 'You see, our job was to shape up your young minds, a teacher does not have a caste…' I thought, in a society where everything is defined by this nonsensical hierarchy, how could teachers be untouched by it?

The awareness of the Dalit legacy, the movement and the literature, would follow only during my college days, in the early 2000s. I became part of the Bahujan Student Network that was started by Bahujan students studying social work in TISS and Nirmala Niketan. Here I also got to know that the ailment of caste was not restricted to Maharashtra. Gradually, I also got to know caste had travelled the seven seas and it was not restricted to India alone. Caste had travelled the globe and its

discriminatory practices still guided people's life decisions, such as marriage and social intermingling even in countries other than India!

College years of social work education gave us Bahujan students, opportunities to form our own groups to discuss Babasaheb thoroughly. Social movements like Campaign for Human Rights led by Late Adv. Eknath Awad showed the thriving nature of movement for dignity. Exposure to the relentless struggle these organizations waged shaped me into a Dalit women's rights activist. During the rural camps as a social work student and later during my Masters-level research on violence against Dalit women participating in politics in local self-government, I got the opportunity to interact with many grassroots activists. In speaking to them, one thing that became evident was how Dr Babasaheb's legacy and message was thriving in their day-to-day actions. For instance, parents seeking admissions for their daughters and sons into English medium school because Dr Ambedkar told us, 'Educate, Organize, Agitate.' A lot of women who contested election and became village councillors faced atrocities and discrimination. When I interviewed them to know what kept them thriving despite the odds, they would say it was Babasaheb's message that we must live a life of dignity. They would say, "We do not want to live hundred days being a feeble goat, we would rather live one day like a tiger." Here I knew a Babasaheb who had reached the homes of the lower castes and was inspiring them to struggle for dignity.

Recently I was in India for my research data collection, for the topic caste and gender inequalities in policy processes in India. I was interviewing a minister from privileged caste background in Maharashtra. During the conversation, he told me, "See, I feel very sad that Dr Babasaheb's legacy is not carried forward. Unfortunately, the Dalit leadership has completely failed the Dalit movement. We worship Dr Ambedkar rightfully for his great leadership but then, why do we not have hundred Amebdkars created by now?" To this remark of his, I was very tempted to pose a counter-question to him, as to whether a hundred new Gandhis, Nehrus and Patels had been created in the Indian society by now. But if I did so, I would have implicitly accepted the fact that we do not have hundred Ambedkars in our society.

However, the fact is, there are thousands, if not millions of Ambedkars in the making in my own community. And they are being shaped despite the odds. In all audacity, I dare say I am an Ambedkar in the making. To all my brethren who strive to get educated from the remote rural villages to the slums of the cities I say you are all Ambedkars in the making. Do not let anybody tell you otherwise! When a domestic worker mother and a landless labourer work hard to get her sons and daughters to a school, they are shaping an Ambedkar. When I hear news from Wardha that my brother Anoop's students are getting admission in institutes like TISS and IIT and cracking exams of UPSC and MPSC with flying colours, I see those thousands of Ambedkars being shaped. I have grown up listening to the nostalgia of the older generation who often said that no one can be like Ambedkar, that we have been orphaned after his death! Babasaheb lived and died for the welfare and upliftment of the masses. And it would be the greatest tribute to him to create thousands like him. And therefore, in conclusion I say Babasaheb means to me a dream that is waking up with thousands of us striving towards becoming the essence of him. I dare say 'I am Ambedkar.'

Jai Bhim!

The Name is Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar

Artist: Syama Sundar Unnamati (Syam Cartoonist)

Why a Village Decided to Not Celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti

Rahi Gaikwad

It may seem that Dr Ambedkar is the flavour of the season. His 125th anniversary has been observed widely and reams have been written about him. The BJP has embarked on its own agenda of aggressively staking claim to his legacy. The tragic death of Rohith Vemula has galvanised debate around caste. However, what is the price faceless Dalits have paid to keep Ambedkar's legacy alive? Simple acts of assertion like putting up a flag here or a statue there were often met with a backlash. Round Table India travelled to some villages in Maharashtra to look at the stories behind Ambedkar's statues.

In this two-part series, we report from Washim and Hingoli.

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Pangri Nawaghare (Washim)

While the whole country is celebrating Dr Ambedkar's 125th birth anniversary, a village in Maharashtra's Washim district has decided not to celebrate the occasion. Since 2007, Dalits in the village have been petitioning the authorities for permission to hold a procession to commemorate the legacy of the architect of the Constitution. Like every year, this year too, they have been denied that permission.

Ambedkar Jayanti is celebrated from April 14 to April 30 in many villages in Maharashtra. Sometimes, a series of programmes marking Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Ambedkar's anniversaries and Buddha Purnima continue up until May.

The district administration has refused permission citing law and order concerns.
~~~

"The people in power should stop this farce of celebrating Ambedkar Jayanti. You show the world that you are paying tributes to him and in the village, there is a restriction. It is nothing but publicity," said a miffed Ramdas Wankhede.

With a population of three thousand, comprising two thousand and four hundred people of the powerful Maratha community, four hundred Dalit Buddhists and a hundred others, Pangri Nawaghare is a small village, but here caste animosity runs deep.

Social relations festered in the village especially in 2007, when an Ambedkar Jayanti procession was intercepted.

"That was the rare year we got permission. However, our rally was stopped by them (Marathas). They set up a *mandap* in the route assigned for the procession. So, we had to change the route and take the procession towards the bus stand. For this, cases were slapped on us and we were detained for a day," said Subhash Khadse.

Frustrated by repeated denials of permission thereafter, the Buddhists held a procession in 2013 on Ambedkar Jayanti without the official approval. "We were attacked and beaten by caste Hindus. This happened despite the police *bandobast*," said Subhash. Atrocity cases were registered against members of the Maratha community and many arrests were made.

The village has had a history of strife, with old timers recalling a similar conflict when someone garlanded a Shivaji statue with *chappals* in 1996. "Since then, it has been twenty years that we have been waiting for permission to hold a procession in Ambedkar's name. The biggest tragedy is that you need permission to hold a rally in memory of such a great personality. Even in 2007, we should have been given security. How did the administration allow them to stop our procession when we had the requisite permission? We have petitioned every authority right up to the State secretariat but to no avail. We do not know what more can be done. Does the administration want our lives to accede to our

long-pending demand? It is in protest that we have decided not to celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti this year," said Ramdas.

District authorities dismissed the caste hostilities and scuffles as the result of political manipulations.

An official source, who did not wish to be named, told Round Table India, "I agree the Buddhists are deprived of their legal rights. They should be allowed to hold a procession. This is a democracy but the top authorities are not willing to take the risk but having said that no community is above blame. The Buddhist women sing songs such as '*Patil* (reference to Maratha) women wear shimmering saris' and abuse Brahmins. Why would the Marathas not react? You can praise your religion, but why do you criticise other religions? On the other hand, the Marathas conduct *bhagwats* (religious discourses) in the temples at the time of Ambedkar Jayanti. None of their members turn up for the peace committee meetings. There is only one man from the Maratha community who says he will not let the Buddhists hold a procession till his death. But that does not mean the entire community is like him. This has to do with illiteracy. And how is that anger displayed only at the time of Ambedkar Jayanti? The Buddhists work in the fields of the Marathas, they ride their motorbikes to go to the market. All these interactions are smooth around the year, except during the Jayanti period. And after it is over, they go back to their regular exchanges. This is such strange behaviour!"

Over twenty people from the Buddhist community and nearly double the number from the Marathas were served externment notices on the eve of Ambedkar's anniversary. Among those externed are Paryagbai Wankhede, Janabai Khadse and Sugandhabai Tajne, a trio of older Dalit women roughly in the age group of sixty to ninety.

Like others, they were served externment notices under section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), which gives power to the authorities to issue an order in cases of nuisance or apprehended danger.

"The superintendent of police and the Malegaon police [local police station] have proposed restrictions on being within or entering the jurisdiction of the Malegaon police station from 8 a.m. of April 14, 2016, to 8 a.m. of April 16," the notice said.

The women, who also have cases of unlawful assembly filed against them were amused at the official assessment of their ability to create nuisance.

"I was the one who was beaten with thick sticks in 2013. I was abused with words such as *Maharde* and *Dhede* (references to lower castes) and then, I am also the one to be booked in a case? I was in jail for two days and had to shell out fifteen thousand rupees for my bail. And now this notice," said 65-year-old Paryagbai.

The central government's efforts to acquire Ambedkar's house in London has cut no ice in this village.

"We do not know what is happening in a foreign land. Why is nothing happening in this village?" asks Ramdas.

Surviving boycott for Ambedkar's sake

Rahi Gaikwad

Pimpalgaon (Washim)

The local provision store turns them away. The flour mill refuses to grind their grain. The village well becomes a no-go zone. Barred from farm work, their daily wages stop. And a boycott begins.

Several Dalits in several villages in Washim and Hingoli district are reeling under the impact of boycotts, some lasting up to a year. What is their crime? Celebrating Ambedkar Jayanti and following his teachings.

A week ago, the Dalits of Pimpalgaon in Maharashtra's Washim district began to receive water supply through a tanker. Till recently, they could not draw water from the fields of the Maratha landowners and had to travel five kilometres from the village to fetch it.

Caste conflict began with a *Dhamma Shibhir* (Buddhism workshop) they organised on the Republic Day in 2015, which took a violent turn during the Ambedkar Jayanti that year.

"We had invited a guest from Mumbai to guide us on Ambedkar's Twenty Two vows[1]. While all of us were sitting in the *vihar*, Vishnu Nirgude (from the Maratha community) stormed inside and threatened us. He said he would bring 10-12 strong youths with him and show us *Brahma, Vishnu* and *Mahesh*[2]," said Datta Tayde, a farm labourer, a portion of whose house was set on fire in the subsequent violence unleashed a few months later.

[1] Ambedkar prescribed Twenty Two vows to his followers during the historic religious conversion to Buddhism in 1956 at Nagpur's Deekshabhoomi.
[2] The first of the twenty-two vows is: *I shall have no faith in Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh nor shall I worship them.*

"On April 20, 2015, we celebrated Ambedkar Jayanti. On April 23, the boycott began and on April 25, our houses were burnt. An Ambedkar library in the village was vandalised and his photo smashed," said Tayde.

"They stoned our houses. As April approaches and we begin to play Babasaheb's songs, the stone pelting also begins. This year we had some respite. Children still get scared even if it is a cat jumping on the roof," said Sanghamitra Pattebahadur.

People complained that only twenty-two victims of the attack received State compensation. They recalled the early days of the boycott with horror and said they were harsh, to the extent that Marathas had even imposed a fine of five thousand rupees on anyone seen talking to Dalits, some of whom were nearly driven to starvation.

However, village *sarpanch* Pandit Bhusare, from the Maratha community told Round Table India that the dispute and boycott were the result of an argument at a hand-operated water pump, where a group of youths from the Buddhist community took photographs of some women.

Asked about the role of Vishnu Nirgude, Bhusare confirmed, "He has several cases against him. He is the cause of all this communal tension. He went and abused them (Buddhists) during their meeting. He asked me a couple of times why I was supplying water in a tanker to the Dalit colony, but I have to think of everybody."

When Round Table India went to Nirgude's house, neighbours said he did not stay in the village, a claim refuted by the *sarpanch*.

The prolonged strife had an impact on this year's 125th anniversary celebrations. The Buddhists were not given permission to hold a procession through the village, but were assigned a round-about route along the periphery of the village.

"Other religious processions, including Holi rally, are allowed through the village into the Dalit colony, then why not Babasaheb's procession? They want to keep Babasaheb on the outskirts," said Nanda Waghmare.

Garkheda (Hingoli)

In Hingoli district's Garkheda village, a Dalit woman Mathura Khillare did the unthinkable. In her capacity as an *anganwadi* worker, she objected to waste water being directed from the *sarpanch's* house to the *anganwadi* doorstep two years ago. The backlash that followed drove four Dalits' households in the village to the precarious edge of survival.

Vidya at her Anganwadi

The Marathas pulled out their children from the *anganwadi*, leaving Khillare with only one Dalit and three savarna children in her care. The

sarpanch petitioned the authorities to dismiss her and her helper Vidya Tayde from service. The impact of the boycott is still felt as Dalit men are still not engaged for work in the fields.

"They even stopped taking *sukdi*[3]. We were not allowed to draw water from the well. We used river water for two years. We would make small ditches on the river bank to collect water, and they would defecate in those. So, the next day we would dig fresh ditches. We struggled a lot for water," said Khillare, who was awarded the Rajmata Jijau Excellence award in 2012 for her work. Today her fate hangs in balance.

The Dalits have been provided a bore well after they wrote to the district administration and sat in fast.

[3] A wheat-based supplement given to *anganwadis* for distribution among children up to six years and pregnant women

Babasaheb is for *All* of Us

Ravindra Kumar Goliya

Best wishes to everyone on the 125th birth anniversary of Babasaheb! Today I want to ask you why we celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti. Is it only to remember him? Is it sufficient to remember that Babasaheb did this or did that for us? Do we remember him for a day as if he is God and forget about him for the rest of the year? If yes, it is very unfair to Babasaheb's legacy because he had clearly told us that we must refrain from hero-worship.

Should we then **not** celebrate Babasaheb's Jayanti, or that of any other great person? If we are going to only think of them, or read their biography, then certainly not. If we are to celebrate it, we must discuss their thoughts and analyse their ideology in today's context. I will try to do that here.

These days, across the country, there is a lot of discussion about nationalism. In a country that globally ranks 130th (out of a total of 188 countries) in the Human Development Index, we should ideally be talking about how to improve our health services, how to implement a quality universal education system, and how to enhance the quality of life of all the Indian citizens. How do we make these necessities available to everyone - poor or rich, rural or urban dwellers - irrespective of religion and caste? It is by solving these issues that we will become a developed nation. But, what are we busy doing? We are busy discussing nationalism.

You must have heard a lot of things in the discussions on Nationalism but I do not wish to repeat them here. If we are interested in finding out Babasaheb's thoughts on nation, we should read the speech he gave on the 25th of November, 1949 in the Constituent Assembly. In many respects, this speech is more relevant today than it was then. He said,

I am of opinion that in believing that we are a nation, we are cherishing a great delusion. How can people divided into several thousands of castes be a nation? The sooner we realise that we are not yet a nation in the social and psychological sense of the world, the better for us. For then only we shall realise the necessity of becoming a nation and seriously think of ways and means of realising the goal. The realisation of this goal is going to be very difficult – far more difficult than it has been in the United States. The United States has no caste problem. In India, there are castes. The castes are anti-national. In the first place because they bring about separation in social life. They are anti-national also because they generate jealousy and antipathy between caste and caste. But we must overcome all these difficulties if we wish to become a nation. For, fraternity can be a fact only when there is a nation. Without fraternity, equality and liberty will be no deeper than coats of paint.

All of us know that our constitution is founded on these very three principles- equality, freedom, and fraternity. So, we must also understand that Constitutional reservations are a part of nation-building process based on the same values. And that is how it should be viewed, not like some poverty alleviation program. Reservation is an integral part of any democracy. If you deny proportional representation to all communities in a democracy and do not establish equality, then the fraternal feelings would never develop. And without fraternity no nation can be imagined.

A French social scientist Ernest Renan who in his famous essay '*What is a nation?'* defined a nation as one that has common joys and common suffering.[4] He says that suffering together is of more value than joy, for it imposes duties, and requires common effort. A nation is therefore a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future. However, forget being grieved, if we are not even aware of Dalit

[4] Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?", text of a conference delivered at the Sorbonne on 11 March, 1882, available as text on http://www.nationalismproject.org/what/renan.htm

massacres like Lakshmanpur Bathe, Bathani Tola, Marichjhapi and others, then what nation are we talking about? What kind of nationalism are these contestations for? We should think about these questions.

Lastly, I want to say that even though our country is full of contradictions, it is a good thing that the entire country is celebrating Babasaheb's 125th birth anniversary. For example, it is only the SC/ST Employees Association that organizes celebrations on this day every year. When Babasaheb negotiated labour rights with the British government and when he ensured that working hours were brought down to eight hours against the initial proposals of bringing it down from eighteen to just fourteen hours, he was not talking on behalf of SC/ST workers alone, but all workers. The maternity leave that women workers get today is a result of the efforts put in by Babasaheb. The Hindu Code bill that gave numerous rights to women was opposed by many women themselves who carried out protests at that time. When it failed to pass in the parliament, Babasaheb resigned from his post as the Union Minister of Law and Justice. Despite this, those fighting for women's rights today do not recognize Babasaheb for his many contributions to the same struggle. Every bank's SC/ST Employees Association puts up stalls on Parliament Street in Delhi every year on this day. When everyone knows that Reserve Bank of India was established based on Babasaheb's thesis *Problem of Rupee in India and its Remedies* and the monetary policy for the entire nation is formed by RBI, then why is it that only SC/ST Employees Associations put up stalls to celebrate him? Understanding this is beyond me.

The other day, I was looking at a B.A. Sociology curriculum and saw that they had put up some content on Varnashram and caste. The syllabus included the writings of various foreign specialists and some Indian ones, but there was none included which was written by Babasaheb who had spent an entire lifetime fighting caste and had authored many writings backed with intensive research. He was mentioned nowhere.

In my opinion, to pay a real tribute to Babasaheb, we should all be striving to establish an equitable and casteless society by understanding Ambedkar's thought and ideology.

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This article has been translated from Hindi by ***Kanika Sori****.*
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Ambedkarite Movement in Kalahandi, Odisha: Some Reflections

Bansidhar Deep

Recently in Kalahandi, Odisha, Ambedkar's 125th birth anniversary was celebrated on a big scale. This celebration was deliberated and planned by the Ambedkarite groups in Kalahandi. Ironically, the right-wing forces were also celebrating Ambedkar on their platforms for vote bank and other political purposes. Kalahandi is one of the backward districts in India and particularly in Odisha. This district consists of more than 2,250 villages and thirteen blocks. But the interesting point is that the 125th birth anniversary of Dr B.R. Ambedkar was celebrated in almost every village and block of the district by different groups. This event commenced on the 1st of April, 2016 from Ampani, a village where the "*Buddharaja*" temple is located and concluded on the 14th of April, 2016 at Bhawanipatna (the district headquarters) near Rando Majhi chowk with great joy and hope. This procession known as *Ambedkar Jyoti (mashal) Jatra*, was organized by the *Ambedkar Jayanti Palan Committee*. Before starting this event, Ambedkarite groups conducted meetings in every panchayat and block to mobilize the people and make it successful. But simultaneously, other Ambedkarite forces were also celebrating Ambedkar in different places.

There are two aspects of the Ambedkarite movement. First, emancipatory ideals urge Ambedkarites to fight against the brahminical social order which is not egalitarian and is an oppressive/casteist/misogynist social order, and transform it into an egalitarian social order. Second, Ambedkarism is for politics of social justice, dignity and self-respect. However, these two aspects are inseparable. Before beginning to write about Ambedkarite movement and politics in Kalahandi, let me discuss the background of the Ambedkarite movement in general.

Background of Ambedkarite Movement

The historical fact is that Ambedkar was born in an untouchable community, *"Mahar."* His whole life was full of struggles. Since he was an untouchable, he had to face caste discrimination, untouchability, humiliation, and oppression from upper caste Hindus. Therefore, he had the experience of caste discrimination and untouchability. However, through different opportunities in his life, he achieved a status which no Indian could have achieved in that situation. He studied Indian society thoroughly and diagnosed the problem that is Brahmanism. Therefore, he appealed for annihilation of caste. He not only identified the problems, but also discovered the ways through which these problems could be overcome. So, throughout his life he tried to find various ways to annihilate the caste system in India. For example, embracing Buddhism and leaving Hinduism, making a democratic constitution where untouchability was declared illegal, burning of *Manusmriti* and so on.

India is a country where more than six thousand castes exist. And the society has been structured in such a way that lower caste people are viewed as inferior by upper-castes and are being dominated in every field. This is seen in politics, education, law, religion, society and so on. Since all the castes are further divided into many castes or sub-castes which are sanctified by Hinduism, there is very little possibility of uniting them. This is the reason lower castes are not being able to unite themselves to revolt against upper-castes in this country. Since Indian society is a caste-based society, it is not egalitarian and is hierarchical. Hence, it is very difficult to ensure liberty, equality, fraternity and justice for all. Therefore, Ambedkar led his movement for justice, liberty, equality and fraternity both in social and political spheres.

Ambedkar had attempted to unite all the untouchable castes in his movement. Since he had the experience of caste discrimination and untouchability, he knew the intensity of discrimination, humiliation, exclusion and oppression in India. He says that in India all the lower

castes receive the same discrimination from brahmins. However, as you go down the caste ladder, the caste discrimination is greater in degree and if you go upwards from the bottom, you will face less caste discrimination. In other words, the lower castes (*shudra* and *ati-shudra* in Phule's language) of this country face more caste discrimination than upper castes (*baniya, bhumihar, thakur, rajput, kamma* and *reddy*). Therefore, Ambedkar's theory on caste is an insightful analysis as it is structured on "ascending order of reverence and descending order of contempt." Of course, caste, as he writes, is not a simple gradation, but graded inequality. Having discussed the background of Ambedkarite movement in brief, let me now discuss how Ambedkarism is growing in Kalahandi, Odisha.

Emergence of Ambedkarism in Kalahandi

In Odisha, historically there have been many movements against brahminical culture and politics, such as Buddhism in ancient Odisha, Bhima Bhoi (cultural and religious movement against brahminism) and the tribal resistances against brahminical culture. Ambedkarism was introduced for the first time in Kalahandi by Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) to make oppressed/suppressed people conscious of politics and society. But now there are many groups which have joined in the activity, such as BAMCEF, Kalinga Mitra Trust (KMT), Bahujan Mukti Party (BMP), Bharatiya Vidyarthi Morcha (BVM), Mulnivasi, AIMBSES, and Ambedkarite Party of India (API). Recently, in Odisha and particularly in Western Odisha, Ambedkarism is emerging through various engagements. This engagement we see in the form of celebrating Ambedkar, through different rallies (recently BAMCEF organized a march of three hundred bikes at Bawanipatna - district headquarters of Kalahandi - on the occasion of Ambedkar Jayanti), seminars, discussions, conferences, meetings, creating counter culture by adopting Buddhist practices in marriages and other socio-cultural activities, and engaging with Ambedkar in politics, social movements and so on.

Although BSP introduced Ambedkar in Kalahandi, somehow it failed to introduce Ambedkar to the masses. But the recent celebrations of 125th

Jayanti of Ambedkar by the scattered Ambedkarite groups have introduced Ambedkar to almost every person of the district, at the village, panchayat, and block levels. They did this by visiting almost all blocks of the district with band *(baja),* singing songs on Ambedkar. At night, they were screening documentaries, and distributing some literature on Ambedkar as well. Therefore, they have been doing their best to introduce Ambedkar to the masses, which is an achievement for Ambedkarite politics and movement. This event is the making of history for the masses of the Ambedkarite movement in Kalahandi and Odisha.

An interesting development is that Ambedkarism is also emerging in universities and colleges through students and in society at large through other Ambedkarites. One of the achievements of Ambedkarite movement today is that the new-generation, youth and students are more active in understanding Ambedkarism. For example, After Rohith Vemula's suicide (which was an institutional murder) at HCU, a huge number of Ambedkarite-Bahujan students came out on the streets all over India, including Kalahandi.

It is well known that Kalahandi is a district where people are facing discrimination at multiple levels; economically, socially and culturally. Even though the district has enough natural resources, we see more drought, poverty and starvation; and this shows that lower castes in Kalahandi are poor and exploited severely by the brahmin-savarnas. Population wise, SC/ST/OBC are majority in this district but the lower castes/ untouchable castes have been facing a lot of caste atrocities, caste conflicts, discrimination, exclusion, humiliation and oppression from upper caste Hindus.

Kalahandi district is the part of KBK (Kalahandi, Bolangir and Koraput) area, which means it is one of the most backward and underdeveloped districts in India. In this situation, emerging Ambedkarism in Kalahandi is a good sign for the Ambedkarite-Bahujan Movement and its future. This is because celebrating Ambedkar amidst such a brahminical culture (*Jagannath* and Hindu dominating

exploitative/hegemonic culture) is itself a negation of brahminism. Thus, this is not just a celebration but it is making people conscious about social, political and cultural issues. I would say this event has prepared the ground at a mass level to annihilate caste and move forward towards an egalitarian and casteless society.

Articulating Ambedkarism in Kalahandi

This section is not for criticizing Ambedkarite Movement and politics in Kalahandi but to articulate our own struggle towards Ambedkarism and its missions. The celebration of *Ambedkar Jayanti* is not new either within or outside India. In fact, Ambedkar is being celebrated across political party lines, including BJP, Congress and other right wing as well as left wing forces in India. But the fact remains that in the celebration of Ambedkar by untouchable castes, they have attached their emotion to Ambedkar's ideas and philosophy, as opposed to the celebrations by others and appropriation of Ambedkar for vote bank and other political purposes. This can be seen all over India. Therefore, the question of the 'self' and 'other' becomes important here. Here I see Dalit-Bahujan communities as 'self' and upper caste Hindus as 'other.' The Dalit-Bahujan self is historically and for different reasons attached to Ambedkar's philosophy of emancipation, unlike brahmin or so-called upper-caste Hindus in this country. For example, in recent celebrations of Ambedkar Jayanthi in Kalahandi, it is the SC/ST/OBC groups who participated and celebrated it in large numbers.

For upper-caste Hindus, Ambedkar has become a source of politics. Interestingly, it is not just right wing forces appropriating Ambedkar. The Left is also appropriating Ambedkar for vote bank politics rather than imbibing the Ambedkarite ideas and philosophy. Of course, the upper castes are never ever in favor of the Dalit-Bahujans. In other words, they are always against Phule-Ambedkarite politics and movements. Therefore, Phule speaks of leadership by *Shudra* and *Ati-Shudra* (Phule 2008: 58), which means the politics of presence in

education, politics etc.[5] The same thing is reiterated by Ambedkar: self-help, self-struggle, self-knowledge, self-improvement, self-elevation and self-culture.[6] Therefore, the masses (SC/ST/OBC and Minorities who are the majority in this country) should represent themselves rather than being 'represented' by the Hindu upper castes.

SC/ST/OBC communities as well as minorities are considered as part of Dalit-Bahujan communities by Manyavar Kanshiram. The Scheduled Castes like all other castes are divided into many sub-castes and uniting them politically is a herculean task. This is a big challenge for Ambedkarite politics and movement. This problem is not a creation of Ambedkarite forces, but of the caste structure. This structure recognizes Ambedkar as leader of a few particular communities, rather than as a mass leader. This is also a deliberate plan of brahminism, which views Ambedkarite movement and politics narrowly. Therefore, Ambedkarite politics of today should understand this problem and be prepared to overcome it.

The most interesting thing in the recent celebration of 125th Jayanti of Ambedkar at Kalahandi is that people from different communities and castes were actively involved in celebrating Ambedkar, although scheduled caste people were more in number. This celebration has its own significance, because if we look at the social structure in Kalahandi, there is a lot of conflict within caste groups and between the caste groups, for example between Scheduled Caste groups like *dombo, ghasi, chamar*. Secondly, SC and ST are antagonistic to each other because of caste factor, although caste is generally taken to be absent in tribal societies. There is conflict between OBC and SC as well. SC/ST/OBC are not united and in conflict with each other, but otherwise they are all victimized by brahminism.

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[5] Phule, Jotirao. *Slavery (1873),* republished in 2008 by Critical Quest, New Delhi.

[6] as quoted in Dhananjay Keer (2012), *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, Bombay Popular Prakashan, pp. 71-77

Celebration of Ambedkar's 125th Jayanti, a procession to all villages of Kalahandi

. Therefore, there is an internal problem of unity within SC/ST/OBC communities on the one hand and brahminism as an external problem to the entire SC/ST/OBC communities. This problem needs to be dealt with by Ambedkarites in Kalahandi. That is what one can see in the recent celebration of Ambedkar Jayanti in Kalahandi where all these communities participated. I would say this is an initiation to overcome this problem. This is what was done by Ambedkar (through Annihilation of Caste) and Kanshiram (*Jati Todo, Samaj Jodo*). Ambedkarism as an ideology will help people come together and annihilate the caste system and gender discrimination. Hence, the first task of Ambedkarite groups anywhere is to express their condition in education, society, economics, politics, and religion and then present the ideologies and philosophies to transcend those conditions. That is why there is a need to come together for their emancipation from brahminism.

In the recent celebrations, many people were part of this but when leaders were addressing the masses they should not have been saying or claiming that they are from "Dombo Samaj," "Adivasi Samaj," "OBC

Samaj" etc., although by default they are. In the Ambedkarite movement all of us are for the annihilation of caste. Hence, they must assert, 'we are Ambedkarites' and belong to the *Bahujan Samaj*, which was led by Buddha, Jotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Ambedkar, Bhima Bhoi, Kanshiram and so many other social revolutionaries. This is what Ambedkar also said, that there is a difference between consciousness of caste and consciousness of kind or cause.

The Ambekarite groups are not fully aware of the ritualization of his photo during celebrations at many places. Ambedkar was against hero-worshiping, but in this celebration one can see that people were cracking coconuts in front of his photo and pouring vermilion (*sindhur*) over it. This is why I feel that many are just introducing Ambedkar to the masses in a brahminical way rather than introducing his ideology and philosophy. This could have come about due to poor leadership, with some leaders introducing Ambedkar to the masses in the wrong way, for different reasons; one of them could be for their own myopic political gains which are individualistic rather than collective. Finally, I would say, in this grand celebration, the Ambedkarites of Kalahandi have done great work in the initial phase, by introducing Ambedkar to the masses, but, they are yet to introduce Ambedkarism.

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Our History is Important

Artist: Nidhin Shobhana

"*Buddhist- Ambedkarite Missionaries brought me home to Babasaheb. And it is through Babasaheb that I see and appreciate my history. In the face of perpetual ridicule and humiliation, Babasaheb tells us 'Your history is important'. Through his writings, he brings dignity to 'lower-caste' Christians. He underlines the 'spiritual merit' of our historical choice in the most lucid way possible. He also lays down questions for our future.*" ~Nidhin Shobhana

Celebrating Ambedkar, Challenging Hegemony

Rahul Sonpimple

The recent attempt by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to own Ambedkar and the constitution has stirred a debate among various political parties, civil society organizations, thinkers, and within the Dalit community. The issue has gained considerable attention on national and social media platforms. Interestingly, the Modi government's political move to praise Ambedkar and the constitution, at a juncture when the socio-political environment of the country is dismal, is being understood in terms of appropriation of Ambedkar. However, this article argues that the BJP's attempt at recognizing Ambedkar is more of a socio-political compulsion to acknowledge the relevance of Ambedkar, created due to the Dalit-Bahujan struggle, rather than a mere attempt at appropriating Ambedkar.

Making of the Celebratory Space

The celebration of Ambedkar post-independence can be read in terms of the growing socio-political awareness and the resultant mobilization among the backward castes in general and particularly among the Dalits. The celebratory space is an opportunity for the Dalit-Bahujans to assert their self-realized identity over the externally imposed 'inferior' identity legitimized by Hindu religious norms. While the celebration of Ambedkar at grassroots level runs against the conventional rules of the caste society, it has led to the formation of an alternative cultural discourse for Dalit-Bahujans, which counters the cultural discourse of caste Hindus. In this sense, the celebration of Ambedkar by Dalit-Bahujans becomes representative of their collective claim for humanitarian values through the celebration of Ambedkar's idea of a just and casteless society. One needs to understand the role played by this celebratory space in carving a Dalit-Bahujan imagination which envisages civic life through the notions of equality, liberty and fraternity.

Although Ambedkar's thoughts on the reconstruction of Indian society remain undervalued within the civil society, yet, they have been pivotal in shaping the idea of India for Dalit-Bahujans.

Ambedkar's legacy has steadily evolved as a conscious product of the continuing Dalit-Bahujan struggle. This celebratory space has greatly antagonized the caste-Hindus against the Dalits, often leading to confrontations. Dalit-Bahujans continue to guard this celebratory space even at the risk of facing violent retributions. Being anti-caste and anti-Hindu has had a heavy toll on Dalit lives. For instance, in 2013, in Vairagad, Buldhana district of Maharashtra, caste Hindus refused to allow Dalits to put up Ambedkar's photograph alongside those of other national leaders during the Republic Day ceremony on January 26. By the 12th of October, tensions allegedly flared to the extent that caste-Hindus attacked Dalits. They verbally abused Dalit women, hurled stones at Ambedkar's statue and filed false complaints of thefts against Dalit men, leading to arrest of fifteen Dalits under various charges. Eventually, they boycotted the Dalits in the village.[7]

In 2014, in a similar incident at Kawalewada village in Gondia district, fifty-year-old Sanjay Khobragade was set on flames by five dominant caste persons. A staunch follower of Dr Ambedkar, Khobragade had been fighting the village politicians, who belonged to the dominant Powar caste for getting a patch of land from the Bahyababa temple trust to build a Buddha Vihar. With three temples built on government land, Dalits in the locality had been demanding that the Panchayat Samiti make land available for a Buddha Vihar too.[8]

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[7] See news item "Dalits suffer social boycott in Maharashtra village Buldhana (Maharashtra)," The Hindu, 19 October 2013, available online at http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/dalits-suffer-social-boycott-in-maharashtra-village/article5251298.ece

[8] See news item: *Dalit activist's murder, police reject dying declaration, villagers say will fight 'till the end in Gondia*, The Indian Express, 9 June 2014, available online at http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/dalit-activists-murder-police-reject-dying-declaration-villagers-say-will-fight-till-the-end/

In another case, a twenty-one-year-old Dalit youth was brutally killed by upper caste men in Maharashtra's temple town of Shirdi for having an Ambedkarite song as his mobile ringtone. The song *Kara kitihi halla, majboot Bhimacha killa* (you can attack as much as you like, but Bhim's fortress will remain strong) praised Ambedkar's work for Dalits. As the phone rang, eight youths from a dominant caste sitting nearby became agitated and asked the Dalit boy to switch it off. Eventually, they attacked and killed him.[9]

When such attacks happen, Dalits often refuse to compromise in their assertions, further provoking caste-Hindus. With increasing awareness about educational and constitutional rights, educated Dalits are challenging the intellectual hegemony of caste-Hindus. In this context, the Dalit literary movement has played a significant role in challenging the traditional caste hegemony. It has successfully brought Ambedkar's ideas into the larger intellectual world. Since the 1960s, a growing number of writers and poets, largely from the scheduled caste communities of Mahars and Buddhists from Maharashtra have been producing literary work dominated by the themes of untouchability and poverty, repression and revolution. Above all, their writings fiercely attacked the Hindu religious and social order.[10] After conversion into Buddhism, Dalits have been asserting their socio-political identity through the Buddhist identity. Guru (1997) notes that the dynamic and popular Buddhist literature, became a part of the public consciousness through revolutionary songs, plays and realistic autobiographies by Dalit authors and poets.[11] Books on Ambedkarite-Buddhism are published,

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[9] See news item: *Dalit Man Killed in Maharashtra for Allegedly Keeping Ambedkar Song as Ringtone*, NDTV, 22 May 2015, available online at http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/dalit-man-killed-in-maharashtra-for-allegedly-keeping-ambedkar-song-as-ringtone-765347

[10] J.B Gokhale-Turner(1981), *Bhakti or Vidroha: Continuity and Change in Dalit* Sahitya in Tradition and Modernity in Bhakti Movements by Jayant Lele (Ed.), pp 29-39. Brill Archive: Netherland.

[11] Guru, Gopal (1997), *Dalit Cultural Movement and Dialectics of Dalit Politics in Maharashtra*, Vikas Adhyayan Kendra, Mumbai.

the culture of debates encouraged, songs written, and meditation courses organized. Mass conversion rallies are held where people reject Hinduism and accept Buddhism.

A *'Ghar wapsi'* indeed

The counter-hegemonic nature of the Dalit-Bahujan movement in contemporary times can be understood through the act of religious conversion from the stranglehold of Hinduism to Buddhism and the challenge posed by the Dalit-Bahujans to the mythological past of Hinduism. However, many scholars have a different position on the impact of religious conversion and its significance in the creation of an alternative discourse. Paik (2011) observes that, while some staunch Buddhists assert that they are no longer Hindu and have regard only for Ambedkar and the Buddha, and keep only images of these two figures in their homes along with the blue-covered copies of Ambedkar's writings, the majority of Buddhist converts have merely added the images of the two to the other deities and saintly figures such as Sai Baba, Ganpati, Khandoba, Durgadevi and Krishna that they keep in the *devhara* (household shrine for Hindu gods).[12] According to Dipankar Gupta, even where Dalits have converted to Buddhism, as in Maharashtra, Hindu beliefs, rites and customs still prevail.[13] However, both Paik and Gupta fail to observe the disapproval and criticism faced by such individuals from within the community itself. Newer developments that have occurred after fifty-six years of conversion need to be accounted for, as seen in the emergence of new Dalit literature, distinctive community infrastructure, songs and poetry, ideological growth, political development and the change in religious practices. For instance, earlier, the tradition of oral narration was the

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[12] Paik, Shailaja (2011), *Mahar-Dalit-Buddhist: The history and politics of naming in Maharashtra*, Contributions to Indian Sociology, Vol 45, Issue 2, 2011**,** accessed online at http://cis.sagepub.com/content/45/2/217

[13] See article by Dipankar Gupta titled *Killing caste by conversion* in The Hindu, 13 November 2001, available at http://www.thehindu.com/2001/11/13/stories/05132523.htm

only way in which elders of the family would narrate stories of Ambedkar to their children. With the spread of education among Dalits, there has been a development of community literature. This community literature centres on life stories and messages of Ambedkar and Buddha in the form of books, small booklets, pamphlets, children's books, video and audio albums. The most easily observable evidence of the making of this alternative culture is the new songs composed by Dalit artists. The distinctiveness of these songs manifests not only in the odes to Buddha and Ambedkar but also in their critique of divisive politics and self-interests of Dalits leaders. While the songs characteristically rebuke Hinduism they also lay bare the discussions and tensions within the Dalit community.

At this juncture, the Dalit-Bahujan movement is witnessing the creation of an alternative cultural history. The celebration of beef festival in various universities by Dalit students is a case in point.[14] Similarly, the celebration of *Mahishasura Jayanti* at the Jawaharlal Nehru University by the All-India Backward Students' Forum (AIBSF), despite stiff opposition from right-wing student groups, was an effort to break down 'brahminical cultural hegemony' in the campus.[15]

The recent religious conversion of lower castes from Hinduism to Buddhism during the hate campaign of *'Ghar wapsi'* led by the members of ruling party (BJP) was meant to challenge the saffron brigade. At least five lakh people from the other backward classes (OBC) have

[14] A beef-eating festival held at a university in Hyderabad led to clashes between right-wing Hindu students and Dalit students. Hindus, who regard cows as sacred fought with the Dalit-Bahujan groups who organised the event. For more details, see BBC news report titled *Violence breaks out at Indian beef-eating festival* published on 16 April 2012, that can be accessed at http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-17727379

[15] Mahishasura is considered as a demon in the Hindu mythologies. The tenth day of Navaratri marks the end of the rainy season and celebrates Durga's victory over Mahishasura. However, for many anti-caste intellectuals Mahishasura is an icon of the backward classes who was cheated out of a victory.

decided to convert to Buddhism from Hinduism in Nagpur in 2016. This is indeed a major setback for the RSS and its affiliated organizations who had initiated the *Ghar Wapsi* drive to reconvert people back to Hinduism. At least five of Maharashtra's twelve crore population are from other backward classes. The president of Satyashodhak OBC Parishad, Hanumant Upre is quoted to have said that "we were treated as Shudras in spite of being in Hinduism for a long time. So, we felt that it is better to go back to our original religion Buddhism. OBCs are Nagvanshis, and so Buddhism is our real religion. We want to do our *Ghar Wapsi* by embracing Buddhism." Stating that religion is for people and people are not for religion, Upre announced that "religion is like a home, where we all should be treated equally and respectfully. However, we were treated badly and in the religious texts too we were given bad names. There is no point staying in this home. Therefore, we had launched our *Ghar Wapsi* mission in 2011. By 2016, five lakh other backward class people and even people from some other castes will embrace Buddhism. Moreover, many will follow in the future."[16] In the same way, driven by the ideas of Ambedkar and unhappy with the 'inequality' prevailing in Hinduism, ninety Dalits from different parts of Gujarat converted to Buddhism at the programme organised by the Gujarat Buddhist Academy.[17] These counter-hegemonic actions of Dalit-Bahujans are heralding a slow and steady breakdown of the conventional caste-Hindu discourse.

Conclusion

The history of the celebration of Ambedkar and spreading of his ideas into the larger public sphere has been a characteristic feature of the

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[16] See news report : *Five lakh Hindu-OBC people to embrace Buddhism by 2016*, DNA, 3 January 2015, available online here: http://www.dnaindia.com/mumbai/report-five-lakh-hindu-obc-people-to-embrace-buddhism-by-2016-2049100

[17] See news report: *Ahmedabad DM orders probe into Dalits' conversion*, The Indian Express, 24 October 2015, available at http://indianexpress.com/article/india/indianews-india/ahmedabad-dm-orders-probe

Dalit-Bahujan struggle. Interestingly, unlike other national leaders, Ambedkar's legacy and his ideas have remained relevant for Dalits in their daily struggle. According to Kancha Ilaiah, for a large number of Dalits, Gautam Buddha is God, and Ambedkar is a prophet who established a spiritual relationship between the Buddha and them.[18] For a long time, Ambedkar's legacy did not find a significant place in the state and civil society agenda to generate collective consciousness among the masses. However, the Dalit-Bahujan communities have carried forward his legacy tirelessly. The celebratory space has become a resource for creating a counter-hegemonic cultural space for Dalit-Bahujans. Events such as Ambedkar's birth anniversary, death anniversary and Dhamma Chakra Parivartan Din, when lakhs of people gather at the Chaitya Bhoomi, Deeksha Bhoomi or at local Buddha Viharas, have been ignored by the state and the media. The continuous efforts of the Dalit-Bahujans using their limited resources have compelled various political parties, media houses and others to recognize Ambedkar and his legacy. Therefore, merely understanding the current move of the Modi-led central government to celebrate Ambedkar as an act of appropriation diminishes the long-standing struggle of Dalit-Bahujans in keeping alive Ambedkar's legacy. Thus, the enduring celebration of Ambedkar by Dalit-Bahujans has not only forced the mainstream political parties to recognize Ambedkar but also to endorse him as a political necessity.

[18] See article by Kancha Ilaiah titled *The Ethereal Realist* in Outlook, May 28 2012, available at http://www.outlookindia.com/article/the-ethereal-realist/280966

2

Ambedkarism: The Idea, its Spread and Meaning

Bhima's force shall keep growing…

Pradnya Jadhav

Babasaheb's people have held him in their hearts with high regards without expecting him to die and appear in any textbooks. The supreme form of Ambedkarism is reflected in the songs about Babasaheb referred to as *Bhimgeete* that have been popular long before he became a subject for intellectual discourse. The masses who were deprived of education were the first people to understand Ambedkar. They honoured him with a respectful name "Babasaheb" and often conversed with him by addressing him as "Bhima." These songs by our foremothers documented the history of Babasaheb's life in a wholesome manner. The songs would start with the mention of Babasaheb's birth in 1891, the happiness it brought to his parents Ramaji and Bhimai, the difficulties Babasaheb faced being an untouchable student, his journey abroad for higher studies, the contentment of his community when he received the degree of Barrister-at–law, and becoming the Minister of Labour.

The songs mark the events when he laid the foundation of Scheduled Castes Federation and Samata Sainik Dal, and when he erected the stone of social revolution, and the Mahad Satyagraha-Kalaram Mandir Pravesh. The verses take the listeners through the preparation of the Hindu code bill followed by the agony he faced with the signing of the Pune Pact, while celebrating Babasaheb becoming the law minister and drafting the constitution of India. These songs further claim that our Babasaheb created an equal law for all, despite facing betrayal by this Nation and that he attacked the rigidity of a fundamentalist and inhuman religion and offered us Buddhism which is a humane one. The *Bheemgeete* with such rich meaning and historical rendering of his life events as a founding father of a large democracy are sung in our families and communities to keep reminding us of how hard Babasaheb's life was and how we should not let him down.

The *Bheemgeete* are sung during the naming ceremony of a newborn so that the baby grows up with the character of Babasaheb and is blessed with Babasaheb's presence throughout his/her life. The *Bheemgeete* are also sung during death ceremonies so that the people in mourning get the strength to deal with the loss, accept death as natural to human beings, allow the dead body to rest in serenity and let it take Babasaheb along in the very last journey.

During the death ceremonies, the group of singers comprise of Mahars and Matangs. The words from the mouth of a Matang praise Babasaheb and empathize with the loss, and show that our communities live by supporting each other. They do not draw extreme margins of difference. This relationship counters the projection of Babasaheb as being the leader of only Mahars or Neo-Buddhists, whereas on the ground, these communities are the real torch bearers for spreading true Ambedkarism.

Babasaheb's birth for us was the beginning of a new age towards a noble life, his legacy continued in its truest form through the rendering of Bhimgeete, which had the power to reach every person in the community. Wamandada Kardak committed his whole life to spreading the message of Babasaheb; his songs defined what Ambedkarism is! Wamandada braided each word of Babasaheb in his songs, and hence, even Babasaheb had remarked that "My eight speeches are equal to Wamandada's one song." Wamandada with his full love and honesty towards Babasaheb incorporated Ambedkarism in his songs. He presented Babasaheb as being the Mother of our people, in whose shelter of love and care we are fearless, we are loved and we are humans. What else could we have addressed Babasaheb with? The *Bheemgeete* do not just praise Babasaheb and articulate Ambedkarism, they question society, address the people who left the path of true Ambedkarism, and critically analyse the Ambedkarite movement.

Bheemgeete or songs on Babasaheb are not only pieces of poetry or expression of our lives, but these songs are perhaps the conversations with the society, our conversation with Babasaheb, and an emotional

appeal to him to come back. These *Bheemgeete* have always stood for self-determination, they did not cry about being oppressed but asserted that we have the capability to change our lives. When past generations remained in the darkness of illiteracy these *Bheemgeete* were the only means to find our way out, and to keep Babasaheb alive. These songs say that we do not fall prey to hero-worshipping of Babasaheb but we aspire to become like him.

Though the interpretation of *Bheemgeete* is a subjective affair, one song by Wamandada '*Jagatali Dekhani... Bai me Bhimachi Lekhani*' strongly asserts that 'the world's most beautiful is Bhima's writing, we are Bhima's writing, his pens.' Wamandada, the male poet, writing as a woman says, "*I have broken the fort of Manu and buried him then and there; my mind is full of happiness as I have now become friends with the revolutionary Bhima.*" Wamandada would walk from village to village to awaken Babasaheb's people through his songs. Wamandada, Annabhau Sathe, Harendra Jadhav, Pralhad Shinde, Vitthal Umap continued singing for the Muknayak. Vitthal Umap carrying the chord from Babasaheb in his song '*Me Hindu Dharmat Marnar Nahi*' memorializes Babasaheb's declaration "I will not die in the Hindu Religion." Through their compositions they brought Babasaheb to our generations, they introduced him to us.

The title of this essay is inspired by one of Wamandada's popular songs - "Sena Bhimachi Wadhnaar Aahe," Bhima's force shall keep growing, burying the evil of caste, as it states the optimism in continuing Babasaheb's legacy.

As a community, we have always admired and expressed our indebtedness towards Babasaheb through our actions, songs, and writings. Innumerable songs about Babasaheb were written and sung when he was still alive and active among people, when several facets of his life were yet to be revealed. Even then, there was no dearth of praise for him. Although, listing down work done by Babasaheb would be a giant endeavour we strove to conceptualize his existence in our lives.

Babasaheb enabled us to break the shackles of enslavement. Babasaheb stands as a beacon for our liberation. Babasaheb is the only answer for all our questions and that is the place he holds in our lives. He lived with us each day when we were growing up and also escorted us to our journey's end. We called him as our Father and Mother, and as a dear friend to share our lives with. Babasaheb has given us the rationale to stay alive and work towards building a better place for our future generations. On this note we humbly say, Babasaheb, indeed your force shall keep growing!

Notes

1. Wamandada Kardak was an Ambedkarwadi Shahir and activist because of whom Babasaheb has reached a large number of people. He dedicated his whole life to spreading Ambedkarism among the most deprived people. Wamandada prolifically talked about Babasaheb, his life and mission through his songs. His contribution to the Ambedkarite movement is incredible. His munificent quest to spread Ambedkarism was noted by Babasaheb himself.

2. Vitthal Umap was a staunch follower of Babasaheb, a folk artist who breathed his last while performing on stage at Deekshabhumi, Nagpur on 27th November, 2010.

A Tribute to My Teachers

Gouri Patwardhan

My first encounter with Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar outside the school textbook was in 1997, at the age of thirty-one. I was working as an interpreter-cum-research assistant with a German documentary filmmaker making a film on Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar.

That was the first time I went to New Modikhana, a predominantly Dalit neighbourhood and the centre of Ambedkarite movement, in the eastern part of Pune to meet the Waghmare family. Most researchers, academics working on Maharashtra and Dalits went to meet the Waghmares through an introduction from Dr Eleanor Zelliot and that's how I too reached there; through the good office of the western scholar.

Until that day I believed I had no caste and I belonged to a casteless world. Then I became painfully aware that it was not just the world of my extended family that had caste but my own world outside the family – of artists, filmmakers and intellectuals – also had caste. And it was neatly uniform: it was upper caste. It was mostly brahmin. It was also homogeneous geographically without seeming so. It was a dream world, smug and arrogant. The idea of individuality on which my identity was based was cracked.

But it took a decade and the two films that I made with Sudhir and Pushpa Waghmare to begin seeing the intricate relationship between Dr Ambedkar and his people and the anti-caste struggle. More important was to realize that the modernity of my world – between the art college and the film school – was quite hollow and superficial.

Pushpa Waghmare was a primary school teacher in schools run by the Pune Municipal Corporation. In that shocked state of mind of becoming aware of my caste location, the only thing I registered through conversations with her was that a Dalit teacher can make a real

difference to Dalit-Bahujan students. She took me around to the areas of Kasewadi, Bhavani Peth, Nanapeth and Modikhana to her students' home. Never had I met a teacher who knew her students' families so well; never had I met a teacher with this kind of empathy and understanding. She constantly emphasized how Dr Ambedkar's teachings made this possible. I made a short documentary on her work in 1999.

It was only nine years later when I began working on *Modikhanyachya Don Goshti* (Two tales of Modikhana) that I really began to grasp Dr Ambedkar's political ideology and its truly revolutionary dimensions.

Through daily visits to Modikhana and conversations with Sudhir Waghmare and his family over a period of a year and through reading Dalit autobiographies and works on and by Dr Ambedkar, I could see, slowly, how the great leader had shaken and motivated his people into challenging the caste system and brought about a revolution.

The Ambedkarite community in the cyberspace, mainly the *Insight* blog and later *Round Table India* contributed greatly in shaping my understanding. But I believe that it was only through those daily interactions with the Waghmares and the neighbourhood that I learnt the greatness of Dr Ambedkar.

Every day as I travelled from the western part to the eastern part of the city- crossing Bajirao Road (one of the geographical caste-lines dividing Savarna and Bahujan Pune); the distance seemed to increase in sharpness with time as I became more and more aware of the gap between the two worlds.

It was a huge education to see through the recollections of Sudhir Waghmare about the conversion to Buddhism after 1956, and through the practice of families in Modikhana, how a whole community rejected the exploitative Hindu religion bravely and completely.

Sudhir and Pushpa Waghmare

Through this single act the Mahar community was transformed beyond words. In Waghmare's words, "Ugly practices like Devdasi system, animal sacrifice and getting possessed by gods stopped immediately (after the conversion). People threw the idols in their houses into the canal. People realized that they were following these rituals because of their ignorance. They gave up eating dead meat and refused to perform their traditional duties in the village economy."

This very conscious creation of a new identity rooted in an ideology that opposed the unjust brahminical religion – the courage needed for it was very visible in Waghmare's words: "It was a test of our belief, as the Savarna samaj reacted violently to the conversion, particularly in rural areas. Our people were denied food and water, their livelihood taken

away, and in some places women were paraded naked... As they declared *bahiskar* (boycott) on us, we too declared *bahiskar* on their gods ... All the temples that belonged to the Mahar community were converted into Buddha Viharas."

Sudhir Waghmare's teacher who introduced him to Dr Ambedkar was Balanna Nimal, a dedicated follower of Dr Ambedkar. It was impossible for Waghmare Saheb to speak about Dr Ambedkar without speaking of Balanna.

Balanna Nimal

Balanna was a Telugu 'Chamar' (probably Madiga) by caste and worked in a small shoe shop on Main Street in Pune. Nothing else mattered to him than spreading Babasaheb's thoughts. He was a true soldier of Dr Ambedkar who followed Babasaheb's path with determination.

Balanna inspired the youth in Modikhana and adjoining areas of Bheempura, Phadai by reading out from Periyar and Ambedkar. Every afternoon when his shop shut for a few hours he would sit outside his house at a corner square in Modikhana surrounded by youngsters. He

organized games and skits and drama competitions and tried to bring his Chamar community into the anti-caste movement led by Babasaheb. "Only Balanna had the skill to bring people together," says Waghmare.

Balanna, though he faced hardships, tried to provide a safe and protected life for his partner, a Devdasi. This invited wrath from his community. He went to participate in the Mahad Satyagraha on bicycle from Pune along with his friends. His recounting of these events was itself very inspiring for the youth in Modikhana. A natural singer and performer he used to perform *Lalits*, a traditional folk form, and *Keertans* to create awareness about social injustice. He then started composing *Bheem geets* and singing them with his *Gayan* Party.

He was at the forefront of the movement of conversion to Buddhism. He established Bheem Seva Samaj in the late 1940's and started educating people about Buddhism and the reasons to adopt it. After the Mahar community in Pune converted to Buddhism in 1957 he tried to, through Bheem Seva Samaj, establish Buddhist ritual practices in the community.

Waghmare Saheb regrets that the notebooks containing Balanna's poetry are lost. He only remembers a few lines from some of them and there are a few photographs of his *Gayan* Party taken by Dr Zelliot sometime in 1960s. However, the power of that poetry is evident in his eyes. He recites two lines from one of Balanna's sarcastic poems, full of irony, written on the eve of Independence of India it pokes fun at the selfish brahminical/upper caste Congress leadership.

Gorya Saheban raj dila ra beta nakali
swarthi kombdi dalgyat kokli
'The Gora Sahib gave a false raj (to India)
and a selfish hen crowed from the chicken basket.'

He feels very sad that such a great leader who gave his life to Dr Ambedkar had to die in poverty and negligence because he was a Chamar. That he could not win the only local body election he

contested. His family suffered after his death. But he feels grateful that his community respected his wishes about his last rites; he was cremated according to Buddhist rites.

For Sudhir Waghmare, Babasaheb, his teachings and Balanna are inseparable.

Born in 1937, Sudhir Waghmare grew up listening to Kabir *bhajans* and traveling to Pandharpur as a Varkari. He saw untouchability being practiced in Pandharpur though the Bhakti cult claimed to rebel against the brahminical hold on religion.

During his teenage and youth, from around 1950 into 1960s, his community was going through the turmoil of a revolution; shedding its emotional and spiritual links with the old Bhakti religion. This period was marked by heightened political activity of Dr Ambedkar's meetings, Satyagrahas for the landless, debates about Buddhism and political rights of Dalits, the Scheduled Caste Federation and elections. It was Balanna through whom he and many young people like him absorbed it all. They urged their hesitating mothers and elders to be bold and follow Dr Ambedkar.

I have listened to numerous stories of Balanna while walking the lanes of Modikhana and Bhimpura with Waghmare Saheb and sitting in his small studio home under the shadow of portraits of Balanna and Babasaheb and Shivram Janba Kamble that he has painted. It was as though his presence could be felt in the atmosphere in this district in Pune, silently through the Viharas, through images of Babasaheb and the Buddha that dot the area.

It is not possible for me to capture in words the depth of Sudhir Waghmare's rendering of Balanna and through him of Dr Ambedkar. What I managed to capture on video is just a fragment of what he has spoken otherwise.

I can only imagine what a powerful and great teacher Balanna must have been as I learnt from Sudhir Waghmare about Dr Ambedkar's

teachings. In a way, for me Dr Ambedkar and his teachings cannot be separated from his people. It is a lived ideology for which they have given their blood.

I was fortunate to have met the Waghmare family via Dr Eleanor Zelliot and spend time at their home. Through them I saw the community as people who lived the ideology of their leader and preserved it through individual and collective efforts. Through the imagery of him they created in poetry, songs, performance and literature and the practice of Dhamma. Through many scholarly works they published on him and by him. An enduring image is of young and old people lost in thought as they go through books at bookstalls at any Ambedkarite event or celebration that take place around the year.

So, it seems logical that this should escape my upper caste world and community of elite intellectuals, artists, writers, journalists, poets and filmmakers living as we do in a segregated world. It is as if we are all sitting in 'Camera Obscura,' that dark room in which the world is projected upside down through a hole. It is through here that we would like to control the world outside, weave our narratives of justice and equality that hide our privileges and yet be its protagonist to perpetuate the brahminical power, while claiming the opposite. Reading Ambedkar from here can only amount to appropriating him or other Dalit icons. That is why we do not understand that Ambedkar cannot be read without his people.

The Apatheism of Buddha and Babasaheb's Conversion to Buddhism

Suresh Ravichandran

According to this doctrine (Patit Samutpad - *Dependent Origination), the question whether God exists or does not exist is not the main question. Nor is the question whether God created the universe the real question. The real question is how did the creator create the world. The justification for the belief in God is a conclusion which follows from our answer to the question how was the world created. The important question is: Did God create something out of nothing or did he create something out of something? It is impossible to believe that something could have been created out of nothing. If the so-called God has created something out of something, then that something out of which something new was created has been in existence before he created anything. God cannot therefore be called the Creator of that something which has existed before him. If something has been created by somebody out of something before God created anything then God cannot be said to be the Creator or the first Cause. Such was his (Lord Buddha) last but incontrovertible argument against belief in the existence of God.*

- ***Babasaheb Ambedkar,*** *from Buddha and His Dhamma*

One of the common misconceptions that many have regarding Gautham Buddha is his stance on the 'God' factor. Some say that, he was atheist, some say that he was agnostic, while some others say that he was a theist. Unfortunately, they are all wrong. Gautham Buddha was an 'Apatheist.'

Now, what is Apatheism? Apatheism is the apathy or the lack of interest in belief and non-belief of god. Apatheism is the stance one would take when one has gotten more mature. Apatheism is a level that is beyond atheism. It is a stance taken when one knows that there are

no such things as creator or god but still evolves further after knowing the futility of brooding over these mundane concepts. Apatheism is an evolved or rather an ascended form of atheism.

The Transition

But the journey to Apatheism is not an easy task. Even Gautham Buddha had to travel along that hard path as he transitioned from an atheist to an apatheist. For the most part of his life, he remained an apatheist. The above-mentioned quote is an example of his stance while he was an atheist. Babasaheb quotes another incident where the Buddha outright rejects god. The incident takes place when two Brahmins known as Bhardvaja and Vasettha have a dispute with each other as to which was the truest path to salvation.

The Buddha asks of Vasettha: *"But Vasettha, is there a single one of the teachers of the Brahmanas versed in the three Vedas who has seen Brahma face to face?*", "*No, indeed, Gautama." "Nobody has seen Brahma. There is no perceptual knowledge about Brahma." "So it is,"* said Vasettha. *"How then can you believe that the assertion of the Brahmins that Brahma exists is based on truth? Just, Vasettha, as when a string of blind men are clinging one to the other, neither can the foremost see nor can the middle one see nor can the hindmost see — just even so, methinks, Vasettha, is the talk of the Brahmins nothing but blind talk. The first sees not, the middle one sees not, nor can the latest one. The talk of these Brahmins turns out to be ridiculous, mere words, a vain and empty thing."*

Here we can find Gautham Buddha being candid in his rebuttal to the existence of Brahma, or God. But one can see a transition happen in his discourses when he considered fourteen questions to be mundane and irrelevant in one's path towards enlightenment. The contemporaries of the Buddha were concerned about two things that they considered to be an essential part of religion. 'Self' and 'the origin of the Universe.' And thus, they asked fourteen questions:

Questions concerning the existence of the world in time

1. *Is the world eternal?*
2. *or not?*

3. *or both?*
4. *or neither?*

Questions concerning the existence of the world in space

5. *Is the world finite?*
6. *or not?*
7. *or both?*
8. *or neither?*

Questions referring to personal identity

9. *Is the self similar to the body?*
10. *or is it different from the body?*

Questions referring to life after death

11. *Does the Tathagata (Buddha) exist after death?*
12. *or not?*
13. *or both?*
14. *or neither?*

The Buddha considered these questions irrelevant and rejected them. Firstly, all these questions could never be answered by any one person. One had to be omniscient to know the answer to all these questions, and even so, that knowledge could never be final. He wanted the doors of knowledge to always remain open, thereby allowing the scope of Buddhism to expand by not interfering with such questions. One could also argue that he had left these questions unanswered, and this has, in a way, allowed the scientists and philosophers to take care of them. This is yet another reason why Buddhism is more adaptable and compatible with science. Secondly, because these questions were mere speculations, and it was a waste of time and energy to brood over such speculations which one could instead use to concentrate on the path of *Dhamma*. This could be proved by his reply to the Brahmin Potthapada when such questions were posed to him.

But why has the Exalted One expressed no opinion on that?

(Because) 'This question is not calculated to profit, it is not concerned with (the Dhamma) it does not redound even to the elements of right

conduct, nor to detachment nor to purification from lust, nor to quietude, nor to tranquilization of heart, nor to real knowledge, nor to the insight (of the higher stages of the Path), nor to Nirvana. Therefore, it is that I express no opinion upon it.'

In Buddhism, this is called "Noble Silence" and it is attributed to Gautham Buddha for his silence on such questions that are speculative. Buddha turned it all down as irrelevant and inappropriate. This shows that the Buddha had completely transitioned into an Apatheist by then.

Man's psychology and the shortcomings of Atheism

Gautham Buddha was a very wise man. He was able to see why people pray to god. People pray to god because of their sufferings, shortcomings, insecurities, helplessness and fear of death. Man's inability to overcome a problematic or a traumatic situation pushes him to such a state where he holds his hand out in despair hoping something or someone would come and save him. This is why he mentioned that all existence was 'suffering' or *dhukka*. This he made the first noble truth.

Gautham Buddha was able to see this through. He was not like the Charvakas or the New Atheist Champions like Hitchens, Dawkins, Harris and others. He did not rant that god was the main cause of all evil and problems. He was able to realise that god was just a symptom. The main cause is the suffering of the people that makes them believe in some saviour. If the suffering is removed, man will rely on himself, and all the pointless brooding over whether god is there or not become irrelevant. The Buddha did not want to waste his time and energy fighting mere symptoms. He always knew that atheism was not the solution.

There are several atheists. But can we ascertain that they do not suffer? That they do not have any feeling of fear? That they do not feel helpless at times? They may not say it openly for it may make them sound ridiculous in front of their friends, fellow atheists. But everyone indeed has to sail through that course. This is why many atheists will fall back

to theism. Theists, in turn, when they face a traumatic situation will jump to atheism. This is just a fluid state between the two extremes. People are caught between it. At the end, be it belief or disbelief, both are on the same boat. Hence such jumping to the extremes happens frequently.

This was where the Buddha differed. Buddha was a giant unlike Dawkins, Harris, Bertrand Russell, Robert Ingersoll and others. He did not want to go after the bee, he instead went straight for the hive. To consider Buddha as an agnostic or an atheist is erroneous. Is atheism going to solve all of people's problems? Is atheism going to end the sufferings of all people? Is it going to wash away poverty, war, and hunger? Of late, all this Humanism and Atheism seem to be just an elitist approach to solving problems.

The right solution

Buddha always knew that Atheism was not the solution. During the time of the Buddha, there also lived materialists who were called Charvakas or Lokayatas who were similar in their approach to that of modern-day atheists. But Buddha rejected their philosophies. He knew that people needed something to bind them together in society. His discovery was the *Dhamma*. *Dhamma* is the eastern tradition, our tradition, whereas, religion is the western tradition.

At this juncture, it is essential to know the difference between religion and *Dhamma* and thereby know why *Dhamma* is essential for both the individual and the society. Religion comes from the root words *'re'* (back) and *'ligare'* (to bind or reconnect) thereby signifying 'to bind back' or 'to reconnect to one's original self.' The essential characteristics of religion are: firstly, it has a 'god' or a 'creator' who is at the centre. Secondly, it has a holy book or a set of sacred texts. Thirdly, it involves prayer, worship, submission and devotion to the 'god.' Fourthly, there are priests involved who lead the prayers, rituals and worship. Fifthly, it has a large following that happen to lead their day to day lives according to the dictates of the 'god' as prescribed in the 'holy texts.'

Dhamma has four meanings as explained by several venerable masters. Firstly, that it is the ultimate law of existence. Secondly, that it is justice. Thirdly, that it is righteousness. Fourthly, that it is truth. Fifthly, that it is morality. *Dhamma* unlike religion does not concern about the origin of the universe. Prayer, worship and devotion to god are the paths to reach god or attain salvation, in religion. *Dhamma*, on the other hand, has no paths to reach it for *Dhamma* is the path. Religion is the divine revelation of god either directly by him or through his messengers. *Dhamma* is no revelation and not divine. *Dhamma* is the discovery of man for man. Religion is personal, a personal relationship between man and god. *Dhamma*, on the other hand, is social centred on the relationship of one man with another man, and thereby between man and society. Religion is static and expects the followers to live as prescribed in the book. Whereas, *Dhamma* is dynamic and its purpose is to reconstruct the world. In the Indian context, we need *Dhamma* more than any religion.

Again, at this juncture, it is essential to know about the differences between *Dhamma* and '*Dharma*.' *Dharma* is related to Brahmanism and Hinduism while *Dhamma* is related to Buddhism. There are certain reasons why the Buddha did not use the word '*Dharma*' and instead opted for '*Dhamma*.' Firstly, the Buddha did not want to propagate his discovery in the language of the Brahmins. Sanskrit was the language of the Brahmins and the commoners did not speak in it. So, the Buddha opted for Pali instead of Sanskrit in order to connect with the common people. He did not use the same terminologies or the language of the Brahmins as it might indirectly reinforce Brahmanism. This was precisely the very reason why even Mahavira, the principle proponent of Jainism, did not use Sanskrit and instead used another language called Ardhamagadhi. Both these languages were Prakrit languages. Secondly, the very word *Dharma* was associated with an evil system called Varnashrama Dharma which Gautham Buddha was principally against. Both these words Dharma and *Dhamma* mean the same but contextually they have different histories. The word Dharma has a negative connotation because the Brahmins polluted and corrupted the meaning of the word by creating a pseudo dharma, and did all evil things possible in the name of dharma. The Buddha, being wise, was

fully aware of this and did not want to purify or reclaim the word, as he knew it might still only reinforce Hinduism, and so he dropped it altogether and used a word from a different language meaning the same. In other words, that which constitutes Dharma and *Dhamma* is different. Dharma is in fact, *adharma* in disguise. Buddha explained three concepts - *Dhamma*, A*Dhamma* and Sad*Dhamma* (philosophy of *Dhamma*). Only if one understands all three can one understand *Dhamma* .

Babasaheb in his book 'Buddha and his *Dhamma*' clearly lists out what constitutes *Dhamma* and what not, as propounded by the Buddha. *Dhamma* is constituted by a striving - to maintain purity of life, to reach perfection in life, to live in *nibbana*, to give up craving, to realize that all compound things are impermanent, and to realize that *Kamma* is the instrument of moral order. That which "does not constitute *Dhamma*" are - the belief in the supernatural, belief in *Isvara* (god), believing in a dharma based on union with Brahma, belief in the soul, belief in sacrifices, belief based on speculation, only reading books of dharma or *Dhamma*, and belief in the infallibility of Books of dharma or *Dhamma*.

Hence Gautham Buddha emphasised more on *Dhamma* and knew it clearly that atheism could never be the solution because atheism is just the refusal of god. But, what is the atheists' stand on caste and inequality. Both Karl Marx and Ayn Rand were atheists. Periyar and Savarkar were atheists. But their philosophies were always at loggerheads with each other. Atheism makes just the 'god' factor go away from one's head but the deep-rooted prejudices and ill-thought may always stay. According to the Brahminical tradition, there are two sects. One sect being heterodox and the other sect being is orthodox. These were referred to as Nastikas and Astikas. The Charvakas, Buddhists, Jains, Ajivikas belonged to the Nastika sect. Astikas comprised of six schools of thought namely Nyaya, Vaiseshika, Sankhya, Yoga, Mimamsa and Vedanta. Contrary to the popular belief, Nastikas does not refer to those who do not believe in god. Nastikas were the people who denied the authority of vedas. Astikas hailed the vedas. There were atheists and theists in both these Nastika and Astika sects. So, according to Brahminism, the whole issue was not centred on

god but on the authority of vedas, or in short, on the authority of Varnashrama Dharma. There were Brahmins who were atheists but still upheld the Chaturvarna system. Gautham Buddha could see through this, and hence for both social and spiritual reasons he opted for *Dhamma* and not Atheism.

Babasaheb's decision to convert to Buddhism

Out of all the decisions that Babasaheb Ambedkar took in his life, what has always left me in awe and admiration for him was his decision to convert to Buddhism. The level of responsibility and the heavy burden that he had on his shoulders to find a better and a suitable path for millions of untouchables is just unthinkable. To have a clear head in such tumultuous times and to have made the best decision is no ordinary feat. Before trying to understand why he opted for Buddhism, the reason why he wanted everyone to convert in the first place is important to know.

Babasaheb, in *'What path to Salvation,'* clearly mentions this fact. He first explains the absurdity of untouchables still staying in Hinduism. He says that a religion that allows only a few to read, a few to bear arms, a few to acquire wealth while making several others serve the three upper classes is no religion but slavery. The untouchables can never prosper as individuals or as a society if they stay in the Hindu fold because of two reasons. Firstly, that this is a matter of class struggle between the caste Hindus and the untouchables. Second, that if the untouchables stay in the Hindu fold they will be living in their caste and the whole untouchable community throughout the country will be fractured into several castes thereby hindering them from organising and consolidating.

Then, Babasaheb explains as to why one should convert to another religion. He says that a religion must benefit a man in both material and spiritual aspects. To face the tyranny of the brahmin-savarnas, the untouchables need power. Power, as known to man, exists in three forms - manpower, wealth and mental strength. Unfortunately, the untouchables lack all three as they have no manpower since they are

unorganised, have no wealth and also the mental strength to fight the savarnas. So, the required power should be sought from outside. Babasaheb says that conversion can really help as an outside power source. He cites the examples of Muslims, Christians and the Sikhs who despite being a minority are not in such a sorrowful state as the untouchables and that the caste-Hindus do not dare to antagonise them because if one Muslim or a Christian gets hurt then the entire religion will come in support for them. If the untouchables get converted then it shall create an oneness among the untouchables who are fractured into several castes like Mahars, Mangs, Paraiyars, Pallars, Chakkiliyars, and others into a single fold. Conversion shall help in consolidation and a mass organising that would make the untouchables feel that they are one community and if any man or a woman in any corner of the country gets hurt then the entire community will come in support for them. Such a consolidation will help in acquiring political capital and thereby allow the untouchables to acquire higher positions in all fields leading to wealth accumulation. This in turn shall boost the confidence among the untouchables and that they shall develop more mental strength required to fight the tyranny of the caste-Hindus. Thus, he explains the material aspect of conversion.

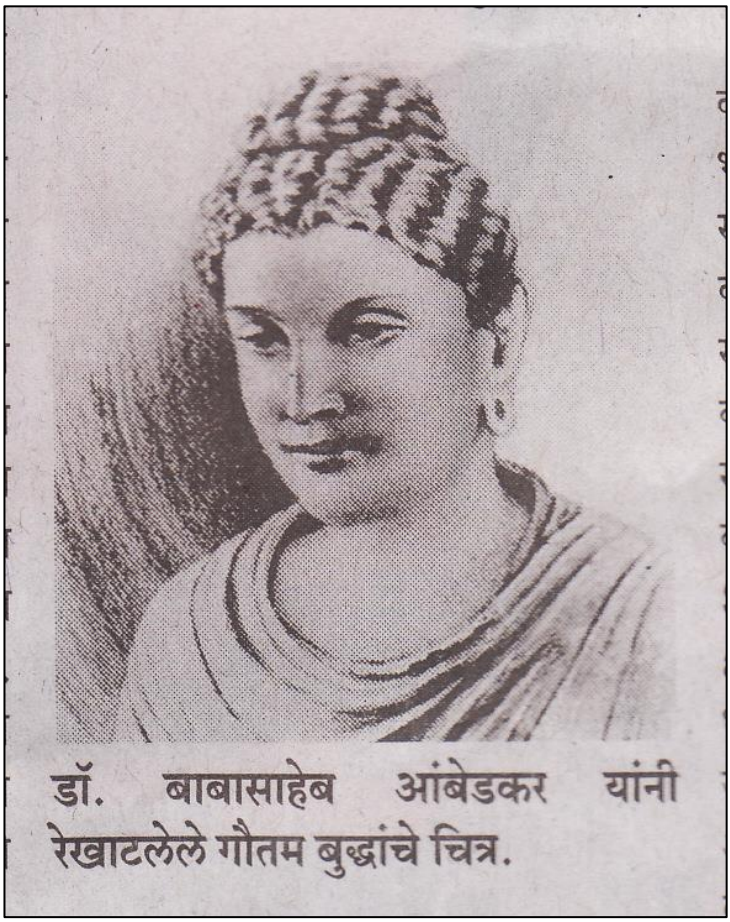
As regards the spiritual aspect of conversion, he makes a distinction between society and the individual, and that an individual need not have to serve and exist for society, but that society must help the individual to grow and develop, and in turn, help in the betterment of society. Three factors are required for the development and upliftment of an individual, namely - liberty, equality and sympathy. He establishes that Hinduism has none of the three and hence it is essential to convert to a religion that provides all three which are deemed very much essential for the growth of an individual and thereby the society. Such was his explanation for the spiritual aspect of conversion. Thus, he justified the necessity of conversion.

One could find clear logic in this. Because historically speaking, three things have been used to always control people. They are religion, politics and money. The priests use religion as a tool, the politicians use political ideology and the capitalists use money to control people. These

three tools are not just tools of control but also tools that can bring people together into a single fold. Of these, the most successful down the ages has been religions, such as Christianity, Islam or Hinduism. Political ideologies or parties, such as Communism, Socialism, Democracy come next and Money next. In western countries, however, after the advent of secularism, religion has yielded its high seat to politics. In the communist bloc, it has been politics all the way paving no way for religion. But in third world countries such as ours the most potent tool has been an amalgamation of the former two - religion and politics. Religion based politics is a powerful tool in many third world countries. Hence, we hear much noise from religion-based political groups.

Babasaheb could clearly see through this. He knew that to counter the caste-Hindus we should use the same tools that they use. Our assertions must be both religious and political. The term 'Dalits' brings together all the erstwhile untouchable castes like Paraiyar, Pallar, Mahar and others together. The very word *Dalit* is 'political.' Another terminology called Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasis (DBA) brings all SC/ST/OBCs together. Even this is political. Same goes for the terms *Mulnivasis* and *Dravidians*. These are all not some mere 'identity' based terms as some naive people remark. These are political terms. They have a big history and an even bigger ideology and the ideology being 'anti-brahmanism.'

However, is this enough to organise and consolidate all our people together? We need to match up to the might of the brahmin-savarnas. So, political assertion alone is not enough, we need religious assertion too. The masses get consolidated more through religion than through politics. Hence, it is necessary to make religion political and politics, a religion. A combination of both these assertions is a must. This, I believe, is the total approach, a holistic approach. Babasaheb did not use the above-mentioned terms but still he wanted us to get political through religion. Thus, Babasaheb took the 'total approach.'



Painting of the Buddha by Babasaheb Ambedkar

This gives rise to the question: 'which religion to convert to?' Babasaheb, the rational man that he was, opted for *Dhamma* and not religion. And the *Dhamma* that he chose was the *Dhamma* of the Buddha, Buddhism. Buddhism helps an individual ascend to a greater height from a spiritualist perspective and also to organise all the Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi from a societal perspective. Babasaheb avoided religion, just as Buddha did, for one very important reason - that it would go against *Samma Ditthi* (right view), an important element of

Ashtangamargha - The Eightfold Path. If religion is to be accepted, then it is known that god is its primary authority. If god is involved then it will lead to man devoting himself to him through worship, prayers and rituals. The ones who will get in charge of such activities would be the priests. So religion will automatically create priests, an authority, and a new seat of power. Religion will continue to influence politics and influence men's lives not just individually and socially but also politically. Soon, the merchants and the nobles will fund the religion for its growth and religion will become not just socio-political but also economic thereby influencing man in all spheres of life. This will in turn hinder the freedom of man. For a society to grow, freedom is of paramount importance. Both scientists and philosophers need freedom, only then can they contribute freely, and more for society, thus leading to development of all. Buddha saw it happen during his time. Religion, politics and money with its priests, kings and the businessmen ruined the land. A nexus of all three was formed leading to an evil system called the Varna system legitimised by religion and its priests making commoners serve those three classes. Nowhere in the world, had there ever been such a system that legitimised the three most dangerous criminal conspirators of humanity - the priests, politicians and the rich.

This is where even new atheists fail. They assume that religion is the root of all evil and conveniently ignore politics and capitalism. Their approach shall only benefit the rich and the privileged. The poor need more than that. Those who have seen the peril of all three will never reduce themselves into identifying as 'atheists.' Be it Buddha, Babasaheb, Karl Marx or Periyar, they all saw through the three perils and took an approach that was 'social' in nature. They did not champion the cause of atheism despite being atheists, and knew that atheism alone was insufficient to benefit people.

This was why both Babasaheb and Gauthama Buddha avoided both atheism and religion, and instead chose *Dhamma* which was 'social' in nature. Babasaheb wanted to make *Dhamma* political and Politics a *Dhamma*. *Dhamma*, unlike religion has no god. *Dhamma* has no seat of authority. No, Gautham Buddha is not the authority as Jesus is to Christianity and Mohammad is to Islam. Buddhism existed even before

Gauthama Buddha. Buddha is just the title given to Gauthama. There have been so many Buddhas before him and after him. But he has been the most successful pioneer in propagating Buddhism. 'Buddha' comes from the root word *Buddhi* meaning intellect. 'Buddha' has several meanings such as awakened one, being aware, to know and enlightened one. The path of the Buddha is the path of intelligence. Everybody has a Buddha within them. To discover the Buddha within, one must follow the path of *Dhamma*. In Buddhism, one need not devote oneself to Buddha, one need not memorise and hold the holy texts as divine and sacred, one need not obey the priests as it has none, and one need not even identify oneself as a Buddhist. Because, Buddhism is not a religion, it is *Dhamma*, it is a path. One can follow the path of *Dhamma* in day-to-day life and still be a Buddhist. One need not proclaim it. That is the beauty of *Dhamma*.

Religion has always played a greater role in anti-oppression movements also. Martin Luther King used Christian ideals in his movement. Malcolm X used Islam. Here, in India, we have had the Shramana movement, and Pandit Iyothee Thassar used Buddhism. Religion is an essential part of anti-oppression movements especially if another religion is involved as the sole perpetrator of the oppression and injustice. In our case, Hinduism or Brahmanism is that religion and Buddhism is the one that stood against it.

History, Society and Culture

Apart from choosing Buddhism for both material and spiritual aspects, one main reason why Babasaheb opted for it was because of the historical connection that it had. This was also the exact reason why even Pandit Iyothee Thassar opted for Buddhism. Buddhism was once the *Dhamma* of Dalits. After the conflict with Brahmanism and its eventual fall, Dalits were ostracised by the Brahmin class and were made to live as outcastes in the outskirts of the village or city. So, to fight Brahmanism we need to get back to our historical and cultural roots.

Babasaheb, in his book '*Untouchables: who were they and why they became untouchables?'* points out that the untouchables were erstwhile Buddhists and that they had the practise of eating beef, and that these two were the primary reasons for them being made into untouchables after the triumph of Brahmanism over Buddhism. I shall quote the part where he explains Buddhism to be one of the root causes why untouchables became so.

If we accept that the Broken Men were the followers of Buddhism and did not care to return to Brahmanism when it became triumphant over Buddhism as easily as other did, we have an explanation for both the questions. It explains why the Untouchables regard the Brahmins as inauspicious, do not employ them as their priest and do not even allow them to enter into their quarters. It also explains why the Broken Men came to be regarded as Untouchables. The Broken Men hated the Brahmins because the Brahmins were the enemies of Buddhism and the Brahmins imposed untouchability upon the Broken Men because they would not leave Buddhism. On this reasoning it is possible to conclude that one of the roots of untouchability lies in the hatred and contempt which the Brahmins created against those who were Buddhist.

So, Buddhism and beef eating were the two reasons why we were made untouchables. Also, Babasaheb reiterates the 'historical' angle of Buddhism in his book *Revolution and Counter-revolution in Ancient India.*

If Hindu India was invaded by the Muslim invaders so was Buddhist India invaded by Bramhanic invaders. The Muslim invasions of Hindu India and the Bramhanic invasions of Buddhist India have many similarities. The Musalman invaders of Hindu India fought among themselves for their dynastic ambitions. The Arabs, Turks, Mongols and Afghans fought for supremacy among themselves. But they had one thing in common—namely the mission to destroy idolatry. Similarly, the Bramhanic invaders of Buddhist India fought among themselves for their dynastic ambitions. The Sungas, Kanvas and the Andhras fought for supremacy among themselves. But they, like the Muslim invaders of

Hindu India, had one object in common that was to destroy Buddhism and the Buddhist Empire of the Mauryas.

Iyothee Thassar too used the terms 'Casteless Dravidians' and 'Buddhists' to refer to Dalits. 'Dravidian' is a political term referring to the non-brahmin natives of the soil and Buddhist is a religious term. He too used both political and religious assertions. Often, people take the religious part lightly and emphasise more on only the political side of assertions. Ambedkar wanted us to use both means - religious and political. Being political alone is not enough but by being political through religion (*Dhamma*) is of more importance because of the huge historical and cultural factor. Buddhist assertion is as essential as political assertion. A political revolution by us against tyranny can never happen without a social revolution and for a social revolution to happen a cultural revolution is of paramount importance. So, for that to happen, it is essential to understand that our culture is different from the brahmin-savarnas.

In the first place, it must be recognized that there has never been such as a common Indian culture, that historically there have been three Indias, Brahmanic India, Buddhist India and Hindu India, each with its own culture. Secondly it must be recognized that the history of India before the Muslim invasions is the history of a mortal conflict between Bramhanism and Buddhism. Anyone who does not recognize these two facts will never be able to write a true history of India.

Babasaheb writes this in the same book (Revolution and Counter-revolution) to establish the fact clearly that our culture is different. Any community can be oppressed if their cultural roots are snatched away, thereby making them forget their heritage and history. Babasaheb says, 'They cannot make history, if they forget their own history.' That is how the Blacks, the Native Americans and we the DBA became oppressed.

It is clear, that if we break the culture of a society, that society becomes fractured. To bind us all into one, a common culture, a culture that was historically ours needs to be revived. There are several factors that

influence culture such as religion, caste, geography, language, politics, economy, science and certain external factors like invasions. Babasaheb wanted us to organise under a common culture but he was wary of geography being the base because he feared that regional aspirations may lead our struggle astray from our bigger motive - caste annihilation. Same goes for language. Both geography and language divides Dalits into separate groups. So, the only two potential options left are religion and politics and I have mentioned above why Babasaheb chose both by making religion or *Dhamma* political. Through *Dhamma* we can influence the culture and thereby society and in turn politics taking a holistic approach from the roots by building a strong foundation for our struggle. Cultural revolutions, is the seed for political revolution. And so, for our political revolution to be successful and holistic it is essential to start from a cultural revolution which shall in turn form the base for a political revolution. Political revolutions that were not preceded by cultural revolutions failed for not having attained their original purpose.

But, in the name of going back to the cultural roots we should not have to follow everything that our ancestors did. We see so many stupidities happening in the name of going back to the cultural roots. The Hindus want to recreate their mythical glorious past and certain Tamil nationalists are trying to bring back the glorious Tamil age. Babasaheb was very much against such ancestral obedience and anything that was against modernity. He always said that just because our ancestors practised a certain *Dhamma* or a practice we should not have to follow it. In fact, this was one of the reasons that he cited for rejecting Hinduism. Only if a culture or a practice or a *Dhamma* is rational, has some relevance in modern society and is compatible with science, one needs to accept it. Buddhism satisfied all these conditions and hence he accepted it. Even Buddha has allowed his followers to contradict with him making his religion flexible and this flexibility has made it suitable for all times.

It is essential that we assert ourselves not just as DBA but also as DBA Buddhists. As Ambedkarites, one can always belong to other religions also such as Islam, Christianity, Sikhism and others but never Hinduism. Those belonging to these religions can always, however,

organise under the political term DBA. But it would be better if we organise also as Buddhists as suggested by Babasaheb Ambedkar and follow the path of *Dhamma* which is our path. With all due respect for these religions, Ambedkar knew that these religions could benefit Dalits through material aspects but he was sceptical about the spiritual aspects of these religions. The atheist in Babasaheb Ambedkar never allowed him to embrace religion but only *Dhamma*, that is, Buddhism. Also, he was aware that caste had crept into these religions as well. Hence, he avoided religion altogether. Buddhism, on the other hand, is inherently anti-caste, and so he chose it. These were the reasons why Babasaheb chose to convert to Buddhism.

"Three things cannot be long hidden. The sun, the moon and the truth," said the Buddha.

The truth is Buddhism, the *Dhamma*, and it cannot be long hidden for its time has come.

Jai Bhim!

The Lasting Relevance of Dr Ambedkar and his Philosophy

Sirra Gagarin

Time is infinite and the earth is vast. There will be born a man who will appreciate what I say – Bhavabhuti

This is the hope expressed by Babasaheb Ambedkar too, referring to his mission and philosophy. He recognized that In India, primordial loyalties to one's own caste/religion were too strong to recognize the intrinsic worth of an individual unless s/he belonged to one's own caste.

It is in this background that the work and philosophy of Ambedkar and its universal and eternal relevance should be treated. Nothing, be it socio-economic or religio-cultural or politico-national and international - escaped the Doctor's scalpel. Whether the solutions he offered are agreeable to his or the present or future generation(s) or not, none of them could or can shy away from taking his questions seriously. In fact, their relevance is timeless and demands answers from every generation. The truth that his is a multifaceted personality - scholar, social revolutionary, economist, constitutionalist, women's liberator, democrat, prolific writer, journalist, teacher, student of many subjects and prophet - is indisputable. However, it is not possible to deal with all the aspects of his work here; so, I propose to touch upon three key ideas he championed, namely, 'Sacredness of the Human Personality,' 'Women's liberation' and 'Democracy as a State of Mind.'

To my mind the most important legacy of Ambedkar was his unequivocal pronouncement of the 'Sacredness of Human Personality'. As an iconoclast, idol worship was useless for him. He did not believe that it would make untouchables equal members or an integral part of the Hindu Society. He said: "I started temple entry Satyagraha only

because I felt that was the best way of energizing the Depressed Classes and making them conscious of their position."

When Gandhi requested him to support Dr Subbarayan's Temple Entry Bill he says, "The question is, on what side Mahatma Gandhi will be when the question of the abolition of Chaturvarna and Caste is raised?" When Gandhi said that he could not discard *Varnashram* (he changed his position later), Ambedkar said clearly that "To accept temple entry and be content with it, is to temporise with evil and barter away the sacredness of human personality that dwells in them."

He tells Hindus plainly that "to open or not to open your temples is a question for you to consider and not for me to agitate. If you think, it is bad manners not to respect the sacredness of human personality, open your temple and be a gentleman. If you rather be a Hindu than a gentleman, then shut the doors and damn yourself for I do not care to come." Ambedkar, as a staunch proponent of equality, which is another name for human dignity, asks: "Why is Equality essential?" He answers quoting Professor Charles A. Beard: "A society without any respect for human personalities is a band of robbers."

Ambedkar identifies caste as the root cause for extinguishing human dignity saying: "Virtue has become caste-ridden, and morality has become caste-bound. There is no sympathy for the deserving. There is no appreciation of the meritorious. There is no charity to the needy. Suffering as such calls for no response. There is charity, but it begins with the caste and ends with the caste. There is sympathy, but not for men of other castes." Therefore, he calls for its annihilation to restore human dignity in India. How prophetic it is! The poster on Aam Admi Party as "*Upadravi Gotra*" is a classic example. And who in India has a better claim on the title 'Archangel of Human Dignity' than Ambedkar? Hence Nehru described him as 'a symbol of revolt against all oppressive forces.'

Women's liberation for Ambedkar is the offshoot of his concept of 'Sacredness of Human Personality.' The personality of a woman,

according to him, is no different. For him it is not a mere concept but a moral value system that is sacrosanct. He does not have patience for people who treat women as soft or weak. Ambedkar analysed how the woman is victimised by the oppressive, caste-based and rigid hierarchical social system and was convinced that socio-cultural forces artificially construct gender relations, especially bolstered by Manusmriti and Hindu religion. He dug deep into the women's issue and brought out many scholarly writings – *Castes in India: Their Mechanism Genesis and Development*, *The Woman and the Counter Revolution*, *The Rise and Fall of Hindu Women* – all of which found reflection in the Hindu Code Bill that he introduced.

He criticized gender relations that were constructed by the brahminical order, which conditioned women to conform to a stereotypical feminine behaviour, requiring them to be slavish and ignorant, befitting a domestic slave. His passion for gender equality is seen in his student days when he wrote: "our progress will be greatly accelerated if male education is pursued side by side with the female education...," and declaring that "I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved," he recommends education, family planning, participation in political and social struggles side by side with men, a firm 'NO' to child marriage etc. as strategies for emancipation of women from oppression.

As the chief architect of the Indian Constitution he incorporated extensive safeguards for women. In fact, the present-day maternity and child care leave have their origins in his support of the Maternity Bill in 1927 wherein he says: "It is in the interest of the nation that the mother ought to get a certain amount of rest during the prenatal period and also subsequently." He squarely placed the burden of this on the Government. Same is the case with women's reservation. Perhaps Ambedkar is the only political dignitary who resigned from his ministerial berth on the issue of women's rights! Without doubt, he is one of the leading champions of women's liberation of modern times!

Another factor, which makes Ambedkar perennial, is his insistence on democracy. Democracy, according to him, is the only form of government which is capable of meeting the crying needs of the people. However, his Democracy is dynamic. In a speech "Conditions Precedent for the Successful Working of Democracy" he observed "Democracy is always changing its form, that it is not always the same in the same country and that it undergoes changes in purpose." According to him, "the purpose of modern Democracy was not so much to put a curb on an autocratic king but to bring about the welfare of the people."

He defines democracy as "a form and method of government where by revolutionary changes in the economic and social life of the people are brought about without bloodshed." For him democracy is more a state of mind rather than a system of government. In a talk given for the Voice of America he said that democracy could not be equated either with republican or parliamentary government. The roots of Democracy lay not in the form of government, parliamentary or otherwise. "A democracy," he observed, "is a mode of associated living. The roots of democracy are to be searched in the social relationship, in terms of the associated life between the people who form the society."

According to him Indian society is not conducive for democracy to grow and take roots and we must struggle hard to make it successful. He identifies the conditions to make democracy successful: i) there should not be glaring inequalities; ii) there should be constructive opposition; iii) equality before law; iv) observance of constitutional morality; v) functioning of moral order in society and vi) public conscience. How precise, scientific and true this analysis is and how contemporary! Ever since the end of colonization it has been proved beyond doubt that only democracies could provide some sort of stable governments and progress. The Father of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, despite being benevolently autocratic, chose to retain democracy in his country proving the efficacious nature of Democracy.

For Ambedkar, Human Dignity, Women's Equality and Democracy form some sort of a triumvirate. They are indivisible like his other trinity, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. We can say that it is here, according to him, that justice lies. Therefore, the assertion: Dr Ambedkar and his philosophy are eternally relevant.

Did You Know? - 1

Infographic by Saurav Arya

For more, go to Page 81.

We Don't Worship, We thank, We Salute Babasaheb!

Arvind Boudhh

"The relationship between husband and wife should be one of closest friends."

The above statement is the mantra for any couple to be in a happy and trusting relationship. But what is the relevance of this quote here? We are not talking about relationship tutorials here, right? Read on, and it will be clear once you finish reading this to the end.

These days, or I should say since the time dalit-bahujan have started claiming their rights, they have been subjected to blunt criticism from the savarna brethren about their ideology, their means of assertion and ways of expression.

Some questions frequently posed by the savarnas are:

1. Why are Dalits so obsessed with the images of a few leaders such as Ambedkar, the Phule couple, Shahu Maharaj, and Kanshi Ram to name a few?
2. Why are they propagating this concept of man-worshiping, which Babasaheb was against?
3. They have not read Ambedkar; how do they know what he said?

Their questions are legitimate and this is my attempt to make the savarnas understand how they have misunderstood our struggle.

India is home for Gods. Far too many. It would take approximately 129 years, or 47143 days, just to recite all the names of the thirty-three crore gods – if we consider the fact that a man normally speaks about seven-thousand words a day. This is quite a lot of time. Most of us cannot live that long, right? Among these thirty-three crore gods there are some very popular ones who have got an opportunity to find a place in high

priced real estate houses. Some of you have them in the form of images, some as idols and some in both forms. You adore them, you pray to them. And it would not be an exaggerated statement if I say most of you do not think about the ideologies these gods represent, you just want to fulfil your dreams by taking blessings from these gods. Prayer is the only tool that you have.

To the first question - yes, we also have images of our leaders for fulfilling our dreams. But there is a fundamental difference between our leaders' images and your gods, and that is the very ideals which they represent. The portraits of our leaders tell us the stories of struggles that they underwent to pave the way for emancipation of humanity on this planet, our leaders' portraits inspire us to fight till the last breath, our leaders' portraits remind us of the pains that they felt while trying to fight for our rights. We do not worship them, we thank them, we salute them, and we acknowledge their fight for human rights. And you misunderstood it as worship!

And why do we have just a few to be thanked, to be acknowledged? One of the reasons is that we are unearthing the graves of our forefathers who have been killed cunningly, and it is my belief that the list is increasing day by day. When we started, we had just a few names to be remembered but now we have a long list to be spelt out. We had fallen prey to the cunning of Brahmanism which destroyed our history, but we are rewriting it with the help of remnants from the graves of our forefathers.

You say that we have not read Ambedkar. Yes, you are right. Many of us may not have read him because most of us are still illiterate. But does it stop us from knowing his ideals? The answer is a big NO. We might be illiterate but we know what he stood for. We know what he wanted to tell us. We know what he had undergone. We know what he wanted us to achieve. We know what his message is for us. We know how relevant he is for us. We know how painful it is for you to see him always dressed in suits. We know why you had to do a survey to find out who is the second most famous Indian after Gandhi. We know why you have problems with his statues and images. And we know what is

good for us. We know what he lost for us. We know what to do with his images and statues. We know how you are going to react when we claim our rights. We know how to take inspiration from him. We know where to chant his name. We know where to install his statues. We know where to set his images.

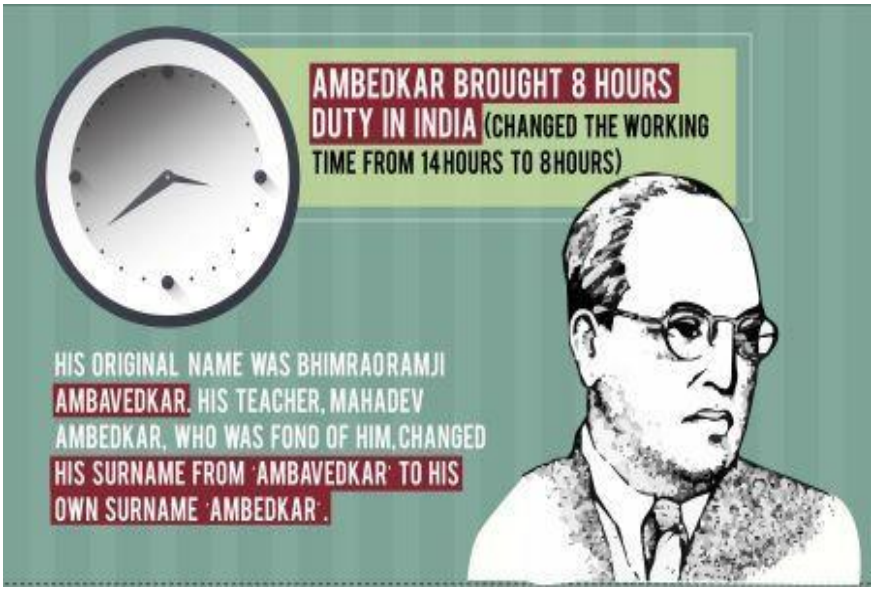
In short, we know what to do with our leaders. It is you who do not know what to do with your Gods except asking for blessings for fulfilling your dreams and claiming your privileges. We know how much respect you have for your Gods when we see them being used to stop people from peeing on the sacred private walls of your houses/gardens. Hope this clears your doubt about man-worshipping.

Our leaders have no match in history. They stood for all humanity. They all stood for their country.

So how many of you have come across the quote that I mentioned in the beginning, and who said it? Any guesses? Yeah, you got it right; it is by our beloved Babasaheb.

Babasaheb wrote on many subjects: economics, history, sociology, anthropology and polity, to name a few. He wrote on how these subjects touch our daily lives. He wrote consistently on what is necessary to found a just society. This is what our Babasaheb is. He speaks love, he dreams love, and he preaches love. That is why we love him.

Did You Know? – 2



Infographic by Saurav Arya

For more, go to page 102.

Ambedkarism is Human Rights

Nilesh Kumar

An author Subhash Kashyap recently claimed that human rights are neither western in origin nor a modern concept, but that they have precedence in Indian culture. According to him, references occur in Rig Veda of the three civil liberties of *Tana* (body), *Skridhi* (dwelling house) and *Jibasi* (life), as also in other Indian texts such as the Mahabharata and Kautilya's Arthashastra.[19] He writes that the ancient Indian ideal that has survived in the consciousness of the millions of ordinary Indians is that of *sarvesham manglam bhavatu sarve bhavantu sukhina*, 'welfare and happiness to all,' and of *vasudhava kutumbakam,* the 'whole world being one family.'

This kind of creation of a mythical egalitarian past and values is intended for present and future domination and justification. It distorts the character of any novel change that emerged through human endeavour and struggles.

Personally, my experience with Ambedkarism makes me visualise it intrinsically as the struggle for human rights without any internationalist or maximalist overtones. It transcends nation-states, which Ambedkar rightly identified in Indian nationalist connotations as nothing but brahmanism's new avatar. However, post-independent imagination of caste and the cultural appendages which reinforce it daily wrongly visualizes Ambedkarism as a sectarian and divisive force, as the exact opposite of the Indian nation's ideals of equality and fraternity. The Brahmanical knowledge structure which does this with its many-layered opinions, ranging from extreme right through progressive left to extreme left, is almost united in detaching humanism from the struggle.

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[19] Kashyap, Subhash C. (2005), A perspective on human rights, India and Human Rights Reflections in Sastry, T.N. (Ed), India and Human Rights: Reflections

It is a huge problem which troubles those associated with Ambedkarism, as even those who ought to be fighting side by side become suspicious of each other and the struggle.

Ambedkarism, in general and Ambedkar's work in particular, is sometimes wrongly reduced to community based exercise for collective rights. Of course, it is an exercise for collective rights, but it is much more than that. It embodies the notion of human rights of an individual, and is a demand for all to live a life of dignity, just by virtue of being a human being instead of rights bestowed by virtue of being a member of different temporal entities such as a nation or a religion or a community or caste.

To achieve the aim of the movement for annihilation of caste, it does make some concessions by demanding statutory rights for certain castes, but this is deliberately and wrongly viewed as being a mere tool for political leverage. This is further used to divert attention away from the concrete agenda that seeks to humanise the historically dehumanised. It might sound absurd for many, but for millions and millions, including me, Ambedkar is the source that provides us with the courage to make an attempt to be included in the human race as equals. Material and social inequalities could vary, and they do, but they are united through their humanity, in their fight to dismantle inhumane structures. For me, it is not just a fight for *roti* or political power; it's a struggle for a just society irrespective of the political system, for every human being. If that is not a struggle for human rights and a universal fight, nothing could ever be.

When talking about the nature of rights that Dr Ambedkar was fighting for, there is a tendency to focus entirely on the means espoused to achieve it. This is a convenient arrangement as it is a safer option to sidestep his revolutionary ideal of equality without changing the doctrine of unequal relations called brahminism.

3

Growing Up with Babasaheb: History and Memory

Babasaheb, Knowing You as Babasaheb!

Pradnya Jadhav

Dear Babasaheb, you uplifted us. You are in our every breath, but in our long journeys, we forget to recollect the moments when each of us first met you. Today I want to go back to see the time when we first met.

I was in fifth standard then. Our municipal corporation had organized a program to pay homage to Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar on the 6th of December. This program was followed by a drawing competition and the subject was 'Life of Babasaheb.' The venue of the competition was Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Research Centre. Run by the Municipal Corporation, it had a library and photos of Babasaheb kept for display. This was one of the least known centres at that time.

When I happened to read about this competition, I got very excited, most of all with the prize list. The first prize was five hundred and one Rupees, the second prize, three hundred and one, and the third, one hundred and one. There was good reason for me to get excited about the prize money. That year, our school times had changed and we were to attend classes in the morning, between 7:00 AM and 2:30 p.m. Children in the morning shift school were considered elder and were called *dada* or *taai* (elder brother or elder sister). I thought, "Oh yes! Now I have grown up." I had very few friends in the school. My best friend belonged to a brahmin priest family, and they had a huge temple in Aurangabad as their family business. She would get pocket money regularly every month. She always had money to buy everything she wanted. I never felt the need to get pocket money as I felt I had everything I wanted.

But yes, I was in desperate need to have that Prize money.

Since the school time was from 7:00 a.m., I would wake up early in the morning. Going to school in winters was what I hated the most. I had

only one sweater to keep myself warm, and every day, the class teacher would say, "Pradnya, ask your mother to buy at least two sweaters for you, are you not bored wearing the same sweater every day?" She would sometimes even say, "Wearing the same sweater daily makes it dirty and smelly. You should change it at least on alternate days. If you stink, I will not let anyone sit next to you." This was despite me telling her that my mother washed it every other day. Her annoyance with my sweater often resulted in her caning me. All my fantastic ideas of starting fifth standard were shattered. I was even hesitant to share this with my parents as I thought that simply because of my teacher's remarks I should not bother my parents and make them waste their money by buying me a new sweater. But the daily fear of facing the teacher would not go away. So, it was for this reason – to buy a sweater, I decided to participate in the competition.

I secured the second prize, and winning three hundred and one rupees was like a long-awaited dream-come-true. With this money, I decided to buy a cheap sweater from the Tibetan woollen market which used to be open only during winter. But I could not hold on to the secrecy of my intention and plan. Something was making me worried: what will happen when my mother comes to know about this new sweater? I felt like I was cheating my parents. As was the practice at that time, my parents were also there for the prize distribution. The announcer called up my name saying mine was a wonderful work. I had made a painting of one of the most important incidents of Babasaheb's life – the *Puna Karar* (Pune Pact). Well, at that age, I was not capable of understanding what it meant but thought of drawing it as this was an important incident wherein his interaction with Gandhi was portrayed as a victory of Babasaheb in the Marathi movies about him. In my drawing, I showed Babasaheb sitting on a chair wearing a blue suit while Gandhi sat on the ground near Babasaheb's feet, wearing torn cloths. I wanted to reflect the dislike for Gandhi in some way. The first prize was given to a person who drew about Mahad Satyagraha and third prize for Babasaheb's Conversion to Buddhism.

After the program, we came out of the hall and my father saw that I was a little upset. At that time, he did not ask me anything, but as we reached home he asked what happened to me and if there was something to be unhappy about. I refused to tell him anything and told him it was nothing... I kept thinking whether I should spend the money buying a new sweater, and was unable to sleep that night. Should I tell my parents and see if they have something to say? Should I not buy a sweater, and save the money instead? But how was I to face the teacher next day without a new sweater?

I kept that prize money near the television. Even after three or four days, no one asked me why the money was still there. I used to get very disturbed whenever I saw that. Finally, one day, my father said jokingly, "It is fine if you do not want this money. I can take it, right?" The moment he said that, I became furious and replied "No, you cannot! I need it." He then asked why it remained near the television, unused. I replied that I had not yet decided what to do with the money, and until I decided on something, to please let it be there. After that there was no mention of this money. I was feeling very burdened at the thought of that money.

One day, when I went to school, my teacher asked me not to enter the classroom. She made me stand outside for almost two and half hours until the recess. She came out and started shouting at me, saying that the whole class was unhygienic because of me, and that I should immediately go home, change my sweater and come back to school! She also said things like "Does your mother not care about you?" and "You people are so dirty! Go change it or leave this school and go to some other ZP (*Zilla Parishad*) school." This shook me to the core, and I took my bag and left the school. I was furious that she had called my mother careless. How dare she call my mother careless? And say I was dirty?

I was simultaneously crying and cursing my helplessness. When I reached home, I broke down in front of my father and told him to come with me to the sweater market and buy me a new sweater. I grabbed my prize money amount and waited quietly outside our home

for him to come with me. He was clueless, wondering what was going on. He came with me and asked me what happened, but instead of answering, I only insisted that he either come along, and if not, I will manage to go by myself. He tried very hard to make me speak about the incident at school, and finally, after much coaxing and cajoling, I shared with him everything that had happened at the school. In a very calm manner, he started talking to me and said that I should have shared this earlier. Then, he asked me, "Do you know about Babasaheb?" This was the first question from him about Babasaheb, and I, in a very firm tone, answered, "Yes, of course, I know Babasaheb! Is this even a question? And what is the relation between this incident and Babasaheb? Why are you wasting time? We should hurry, and go to buy new sweater…" I was still impatient.

He then asked, "What do you see in Babasaheb? Who is he for you? What did he do?"

My answer was, "He is our God. We have only two Gods: Babasaheb and Buddha. Babasaheb is the male god and Buddha, the female god. They did so much for the society." For at least half my life, I had considered Buddha as a woman, an impression I had looking at his long hair, his hands, fingers, and most importantly the *Chivar* he wore which in my mind, was a saree.

My father laughed a lot, and corrected me for the first time ever.

"There is nothing like considering them Male and Female, God or Goddess. Neither of them were Gods. Neither was Babasaheb, nor was Buddha. Buddha was not a woman; he was a man but not God."

I asked, "Then why do we have their photos at home? If they are not Gods, who are they? Surely, they are not our relatives because our neighbours also have their photos? Our neighbours are not our relatives. Then how can we all have photos of the same people?"

"They are our leaders and we should lead our lives according to their teachings. We should not worship them but read what they thought for

us, our people and try to live our life accordingly." Further, he explained, "Babasaheb was a great Man, who was born in an untouchable caste, like us. Ours is considered an untouchable caste. He was the most learned person amongst our people, someone who struggled for the whole of his life for the dignity of his people, and showed them the way in which they should be dealing with their lives because our people face lot of discrimination due to the lower caste status from the upper castes and the Brahmins. They have created a system to brand us dirty, deprive us of education and economic stability and force us to live a miserable life. But Babasaheb fought and fought to take us out from the gutter of casteism, he gave a message to our people to organize, educate and agitate… He sacrificed his life for our people and we should not let him down."

After listening to him, I became silent. I was trying to store in my memory all that I had just heard. Words like *Jaat-Jatiwad* (Caste-Casteism), dignity, and discrimination sounded very new when their meanings were revealed to me. Suddenly I said, "Baba, I do not want to buy a new sweater." "But why?" he asked. "I am now ready and we can indeed go to the market."

"No, I do not want to buy a new sweater just because my teacher thought that I am dirty. Why should I abide by her order? And I know she is a brahmin. Just as Babasaheb did, I will not bow down before her."

"How do you know that she is a brahmin?" my father was curious.

"Oh, she wears *Mangalsutra. Aai* (mother) does not wear one. And in the class after giving us writing work, she reads *Ganpatistotra,* and she allows no one to touch that book – that means she practices untouchability. Right, Baba?"

He smiled and said, "Gradually, you will understand, but you should never compromise upon your dignity."

This was my first conversation with my father about the idols I considered to be my Gods without knowing the reasons behind it. Though this was not a very shocking out-of-the-world experience, I learnt from this to inculcate the habit of questioning. I also regretted that I allowed myself to go through such emotions. I wondered why it never occurred to me to ask about the photos I saw every day and every moment at my home. Had I asked about those images, I would not have borne the teacher's insult as I did. This was how I met Babasaheb for the first time.

Dr Ambedkar at Milind College, Aurangabad. From left are seen Architect Mr. Narvekar, Principal Mr. M. B. Chitnis, Mrs. Ambedkar, Dr Ambedkar, Mr. Bole, Mr Kamalakant Chitre, Registrar Siddharth College, Mr. B. H. Varale, the then Registrar of Milind College.

Dr Ambedkar at Milind College with the architect and Milind College authorities. Picture courtesy: ambedkar.org

Every household in a Dalit *Vasti* has a story to tell. Every household is much attached to Babasaheb. My father never knew his real date of birth and could barely remember the year of his birth. As my grandmother recalled, my father was born in the last month of the year. When she was about to deliver the child, there was no one at the house.

My grandfather had gone to Mumbai along with many others for Babasaheb's last procession after he passed away. She remembered this because that was a day when every house was in mourning, in deep grief. Someone had told her that our leader had passed away. She had felt the heart-break of people in the whole *Vasti;* everyone was mourning in their own way, some were crying aloud while some stood stunned, they wanted to see their leader alive! That day and time was dreadful. My grandfather set out, without letting anyone know about his journey, from Aurangabad to Babasaheb's funeral in Mumbai. He returned after almost one and a half month as he had no money left to buy return tickets. He came back in a goods carrier truck.

I studied in Milind College, Babasaheb's very own educational institution – People's Education Society's colleges in Nagsenwana. Here I met friends coming from far-away interior parts of almost every region of Maharashtra. Many friends came to study in this college for the sole reason that it was touched by Babasaheb's feet, because one of their parents had studied here, because they feel Babasaheb here, because it has a memory of Babasaheb throwing bricks on people who would try to touch his feet. Because it gave teachers who used to never allow their students to call Babasaheb as Dr Ambedkar, and instead taught them to address him only as "Babasaheb" saying we are far behind to address him as Dr Ambedkar. We should only call him Babasaheb with respect.

Babasaheb, there are myriad reasons to be grateful to you – for the life you offered us, for the vision you showed us, for the image you gave us, for the dignified past you created for us. We are striving and shall strive till the last breath of our life to fulfil your dreams… We are keeping our heads high, Babasaheb.

Jai Bhim!

Babasaheb: A Symbol of My Existence

Pragya Chouhan

Babasaheb Ambedkar means many things for us. As an Ambedkarite Buddhist woman, I share what Babasaheb means to me.

For me, Babasaheb is a symbol of my existence. A philosopher and political leader who helped me define a dignified life which I can lead with the constitutional rights of a citizen. To write anything about this great icon will be something like holding up a burning candle to the bright sun. But I try to write this down from my personal experience of being brought up in an Ambedkarite Buddhist family and the perceptions I have gathered from my childhood onwards.

Many salutes to this man who has broken all barriers and worked for achieving basic human rights for Dalits who were broken by the caste based inequalities prevailing in Indian society! He fought for the community at a time when the social and political conditions were totally against him. Not only that, in his rather short life, he also achieved much academically, and in intellectual pursuits. I admire him for his intellect, political conviction and his determination to fight for our community.

I was greatly inspired by Babasaheb's ideology of giving back to society. There is a legacy behind this. My maternal grandfather N.L. Khobragade is an Ambedkarite social and political activist. He embraced Buddhism along with Babasaheb in Nagpur in 1956. As my parents were employed at different places, the four of us siblings spent our childhood days with our grandparents. My grandparents never let us feel lonely and took great care of our education and upbringing. I was exposed to the constant struggles waged by my grandfather, like a true Ambedkarite, against caste. He dedicated his life to the community.

A bitter experience from my childhood opened my eyes towards the casteist violence unleashed by Brahminism in our daily life. My grandpa

is a writer. He had published one book in Hindi, *Bharat Ki Vikrat Samaj Vyavastha*, which was a great success, winning many awards. But caste-Hindus did not like it and used to abuse us daily. One night, our house was surrounded by a group of hooligans abusing, shouting and hurling stones. We were trapped inside our own home! They cut off our telephone cable and electricity connection. One of our neighbours, a well-wisher, came in through the backdoor and informed us that the mob had brought kerosene and petrol to burn down our house. Somehow, my uncle managed to escape and get the help of the police. My grandpa went into hiding and was jailed later. For several months, our house and all of us were under police protection. The state banned grandpa's book. We fought the case for seven years and eventually came out victorious. This incident gave me the strength and courage to surmount mindsets of casteist Hindus. I promised that I would work for the welfare of my community.

The poor financial condition of my family pushed me to seek a job in the software sector. My professional environment does not encourage social and political involvement. However, conscious of my stake in the Ambedkarite movement, I ensure that I participate in social activities.

In the last eight years of my professional life, I worked for top multinational companies. I have begun my journey from the junior-most level and am now an assistant manager. I aspire to achieve more so that I can support our people. We need to ensure representation of our people in every field and profession so that we can be socially, politically and financially strong and support each other.

From the age of seven or eight, I started attending Ambedkarite gatherings and political rallies, and participated in many protest demonstrations with my grandpa. It was very much a part of my own upbringing as a child. All these experiences of my childhood and adolescent days are deeply ingrained in my mind. A child's mind is affected greatly by her upbringing. Family is the first school for kids, what we feed them at that age will stay with them for the rest of their life. My humble request to all parents and elders is to give their younger generation an opportunity to get exposure to the thoughts and writings

of Babasaheb Ambedkar. Nourish their roots by making them aware of their history and politically organize them to fight inequalities in society! We need to start creating children with strong minds and political conviction deeply rooted in Ambedkarite ideology, envisaging social change through the annihilation of caste.

Secondly, what I feel is, there should also be a focus on building our own cultural capital. We are scattered in small groups and everyone is caught up in their individual pursuits. Some say *neela jhanda*, and others, *panchsheel jhanda*. Some go for the white colour, others for black and now some others have chosen the colour blue. There is no one common way, but multiple ways to seek Babasaheb. I personally feel that there is a need for our Hindu brothers and sisters to come out of the bondage of caste and embrace Buddhism and follow the path shown by Babasaheb.

Most of us follow Babasaheb based on our convenience. We give lectures, but do not apply his ideas in our daily life. There is a need to bring Babasaheb to our own families. We do a lot of worshiping, but at the same time, we need to apply his ideas in our life and contribute to the welfare of the community by paying back to the society. The emotional component of our attachment needs to be translated into pragmatic possibilities of constituting a strong political collective. Make our young ones and ourselves so strong that no external force can diminish the worth of our existence. We all need to come forward to help and support each other for imagining a strong politically conscious community capable of bringing social change and progress in the society.

My understanding of Babasaheb is to bring everybody to the forefront of this movement for social change, to build that much needed cultural and political capital of our own. It is about knowing, reading and debating Babasaheb's ideas and adapting his ideas to one's own socio-cultural context. Sowing seeds of strong, healthy and knowledgeable minds is the need of the hour. Only if the roots are strong, can a giant tree withstand adverse conditions.

Mahaparinirvan Din, 6th of December

Pradnya Mangala

When I think of Mahaparinirvan Din, the things that come straight to my mind are the preparation which used to happen in my house from the night of the 4th of December itself. My father and mother, along with the help of a few of their friends, would set up their stall at Chaityabhumi to provide food for people who travelled from far-off places to pay homage. Whatever was possible in their limited capacity and with available resources they used to pull it together and do the necessary arrangements.

One such 5th December evening, I was travelling in a local train with my family carrying all the food that was prepared. My aaji (maternal grandmother) narrated a very striking experience. Recalling that still gives me goose bumps. She said the day they heard the news about Babasaheb's death the entire *chawl* where they stayed was grief stricken. With moist eyes, she recalled that she felt the same when she had lost her own father.

Without bothering whether they had worn chappals or not, they just walked towards Babasaheb's residence, *Rajgriha*. The distance between her house and Babasaheb's residence was barely thirty minutes on foot, but there were so many people on the road that it took between two to three hours to get there. The funeral procession arrangements were made; the entire atmosphere was filled with sadness which was indescribable.

"Our father left us, the huge shelter of love and care that we had over us is lost. You brought us among humans, gave meaning to our existence. What will we do without you? The fact that you are no more is unbearable, my heart is breaking, my body is losing all the strength," she lamented. Everyone in the crowd strived for one last glimpse of Babasaheb. They walked with heavy steps with the procession towards

Chaityabhumi. Lakhs and lakhs of people gathered from all over the country to pay their last homage to our Father, recalls aaji.

Pradnya Mangala's Aaji

Aaji says that she had seen the sea for so many years but that day the sea appeared very different. "The waves were bursting as if it was crying with us, as if it was questioning the universe, why did it take away our father from us? After the funeral rituals were done, people slowly dispersed with heavy hearts, silent tears and with the sense of irreparable loss. But I just could not leave the place. I sat, sat there throughout the night watching the flames turn into ashes. The pain was so severe that it forced me to remember and reflect, within me, every word that I had heard from Babasaheb echoed aloud. That was the longest night of my life. That day an illiterate woman like me earned a mission for her life, I just wanted to work to fulfil Babasaheb's dreams."

Since childhood, on every 6thof December, I remember this incident which my aaji narrated. Whenever I visit Rajgriha or Chaityabhumi I go through similar emotions that my aaji must have gone through then. Dalits possess no economic or social capital, the only capital that we have is the inspiration we draw from Babasaheb's life struggle and what Babasaheb did for us. It is not an emotional outpouring, it is how we make sense of our lives, it's beyond words and emotions.

Chaityabhumi is one of the few places from where we derive our strength to move on and carry on our struggle for equality and justice. Living throughout my life in Mumbai, what I encountered in school and college was always indifference and arrogance. Hardly anyone knew about the significance of 6th December, and mind you, I mean not only students but professors as well.

The Shivaji Park area which surrounds Chaityabhumi is one of the elite areas of Mumbai and is essentially brahmin dominated. My classmates who stayed in nearby areas always kept complaining that their evening walks are ruined during the 1st week of December because people gather there in large numbers and stay on footpaths.

I used to study in a library at Matunga, it was very close to Rajgriha. Suddenly, from 3rd of December onwards, less and less number of people started coming to the library. I happened to overhear

conversations outside the library where people remarked slyly, "we have not been coming here since the last few days as 'these' jai-bhim people will come from all places, from all over and dirty our place. They have no manners, you see, I just prefer not coming out of the house. They get everything for free, reservations, free train tickets and what not."

I always felt disgusted listening to such conversations; I wanted to ask them what they did during their religious celebrations like Ganesh Chaturthi, Navratri, Diwali, and the like. Do they not feel the same then? Entire Juhu chowpatty, Dadar chowpatty, all lakes in Mumbai and suburban regions are thoroughly polluted. We do not do that! Neither have we caused any chaos.

If you see Chaityabhumi, Rajgriha on 14th April or between 5th and 6th December, you will notice that there is always utmost discipline in these gatherings; you will see none of the stampedes that happen in temples across the country. We gather not to enjoy and have fun and waste resources, but because this day signifies our existence. They help us to locate that space for ourselves in this utterly unequal and inhumane society where we have taken birth. I strongly feel that dirt is not in the surroundings, *the dirt is in your minds that you fail to recognize humanity and human emotions!*

What Babasaheb and Buddha have taught us is not hatred, we do not believe in hating. We have a legacy of practicing compassion and tolerance. The only reason for me narrating this experience is to remind this to those who hate us – do not think that we cannot pay back in the same coin. We are very much capable of doing so, in every sense. So, the next time you speak about our celebrations, gatherings, your stereotyped images of Dalits, reservations etc. *take a minute to think about your own self, your community and their deeds*!

Empowered by Babasaheb's Words

Ruia Prasad

I think my first introduction to Babasaheb Ambedkar came from my father's ramblings on long drives back from my mother's night classes. Undoubtedly I had none of the patience a ten-year-old could afford to have for old men trapped in history books and the monologues of equally old fathers! But it was interesting to see my father actually enjoy talking about something for once, even if he knew his audience had no clue to what he was saying. Times were tough for us financially, even if we were the only ones of our numerous relatives to cross over from the Indian village to the cities of "Amreeka." But I always felt, and knew, inherently that we were different from all the other Indian people I grew up with. Specifically, the ones I knew to be Hindu. But caste or jati were not words in my life at that time. The only word I could use to delineate my own experiences from my friends, neighbours, and classmates was "class." Of course, it was not enough. It did not explain our social differences, the hesitance of my parents to engage in spaces supposedly meant for all the Indian diaspora, and why that translated into my own long-standing feelings about not really fitting in.

My first introduction to caste was a ninth-grade world history class in high school! Around this time, we had moved from New York to Arizona, a state on the southwest borders of the United States, because my mother had gotten a well-paying job here (those endless drives to her night classes indeed paid off). The Indian (i.e., savarna Hindu) community here was much more compact and also of a different migration wave of young professionals in white-collar jobs. Their children were my peers at school—ambitious, wildly competitive, but hyper-aware of their identities. Everyone knew each other on the principle that they had been attending the same garba parties and poojas since they were born. It makes sense then too that their parents would make sure they knew what their caste was. When our world history

teacher blithely asked if anyone knew their castes, the answers were confident and proud rings of Brahmins, Rajputs, etc. I was confused to find myself without an answer. Not even my surname could give me a clue.

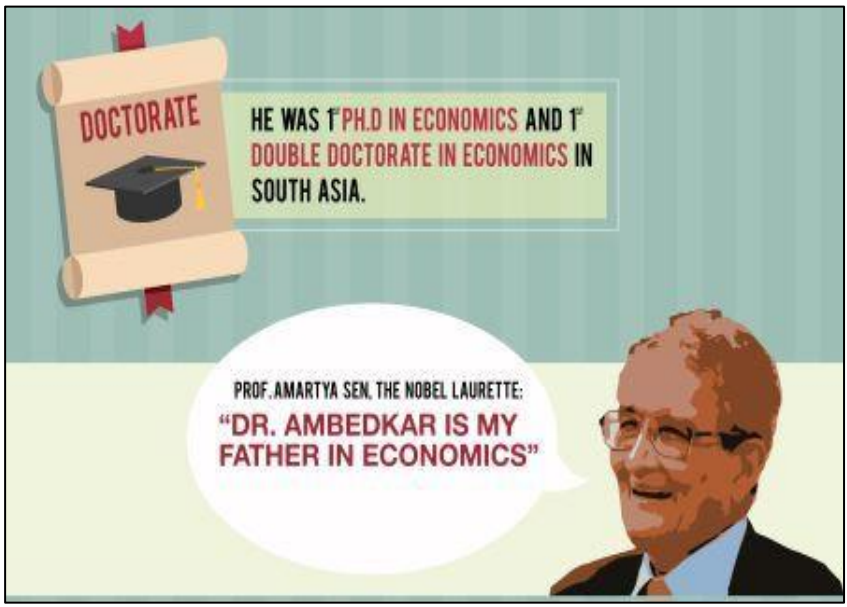
The day I asked my parents what our caste was definitely changed my life, but it also gave me a closure that I had needed in order to understand my identity as an Indian-American with a Hindu name but a religiously ambivalent upbringing. Why did we never thump our chests in salute to the looming figure of someone's Bharat Mata in those gaudy displays of patriotism on India Day parades and yet, at the same time, revere the Indian constitution? It also brought me closer to my family, to understand them as individuals who struggled so hard to leave a cycle of poverty and social marginalization behind. To know that we are Chamars was one thing, but to hear my parents call themselves Dalits was another.

The education, morals, and values that Babasaheb Ambedkar gave them are what they have also passed down to me. The Ambedkarite philosophy they were reading and participating in through college is what empowered them, and indeed, continues to empower them. I'm grateful for Babasaheb and his words that have given my parents and my family the strength to fight against caste bigotry. Just as they did, I started reading his work when I started college and they remain as a relevant as ever. He also opened the world of Dalit discourse online for me, through places like Round Table India and Savari where I could see how other amazing people have also been inspired by Babasaheb's words and his fight. My experiences as a Dalit woman in the diaspora is very different, and indeed more privileged, but I've found the most nurturing spaces for my own self-growth to be the ones founded on Ambedkarite philosophy rather than those so-called "caste-blind" communities that consider the experiences of savarna Hindu Indian-Americans to be universal.

Especially on Savari, I'm so grateful for having been able to read the thoughts of so many amazing Dalit women in all walks of life. You are

all an inspiration and I feel like I've grown with you these past four years.

Did You Know? – 3



Infographic by Saurav Arya

For more, go to page 112.

Babasaheb Makes Me Strong and Purposeful

Vinay Shende

When I read that Round Table India is calling for essays on the theme 'What Babasaheb Ambedkar Means to Me,' it made me reflect and pose that question to myself.

My family's financial circumstances were such that it would have been impossible for me to finish High School. It was only due to the schemes for SC/ST students that my fees were paid. This continued until my post-graduation. I do not know what I would have done if not for the rights that Babasaheb had secured for me.

There were several odds that I had to face, but whenever I felt demotivated, I would think of him. How much difficulties he had to overcome! Babasaheb lived in the era without such modern technology and social media but he still found ways to share his ideas and thoughts with people. He wrote more than fifty books in his lifetime. If this does not provide inspiration, then nothing else will!

When I am happy, I look up to him. When I am sad or depressed, I look up to him. I remember the story when he had to go to the Round Table Conference in London. His son had passed away just a day earlier. Some people requested him to not to go to London. He replied that millions of his people needed him and this was his chance to do something for them. This is what his people meant to Babasaheb.

He also taught us to fight with knowledge. That is a great quality to imbibe. Far too many times, we try to indulge in fiery verbal debates - written or spoken- with Savarnas and end up wasting our time and effort.

Our schools tell us to never challenge what the teachers teach. Also, we are taught to never challenge what elders or relatives say. This makes most children blindly follow rituals, customs and religious beliefs. The

necessary skills required for constructive criticism is thus not fostered. By following the ideas of Babasaheb we have ensured that we are not stuck with this habit. Reading him made me develop the art of critical thinking, constructively challenging beliefs, rituals, processes etc. This has held me in good stead in my work life too.

Some people scoff at Dalit-Bahujan when they see Babasaheb's portraits in their homes. They might be rich or poor, but most Ambedkarites have some photo of him, small or big. It is a sign of assertion. It is a sign of hope for a society that has been crushed for centuries. One cannot expect any Savarna to understand the feeling that Babasaheb evokes. For many, there is no parallel to that feeling, even within their families. What Babasaheb means to me and to us is something that cannot be conveyed by words.

Following his example makes me want to stand up for my community. From him I learnt not to malign any of my community members in public as it is what the Brahmanical society would want us to do.

I do not believe in the concept of God. But when I think of Babasaheb I feel astonished at the amount of work he managed to do in his lifetime. From his writings on his favorite subject anthropology, organizing revolutions for equal rights, from studying economics to founding of four newspapers. This massive body of work has brought emancipation and liberation to millions like me. Thus, if I ever were to wonder whether there is God, for me it could only be in relation to Babasaheb Ambedkar!

Some of his ideas that have influenced me greatly are below.

Political ideas

~ His most important advice was that we need to have political power in our hands. Now, this may not necessarily mean power only in Parliament. For me, it meant in terms of having a say in decision-making any place that I may be a part of. This could be school committees, Student Bodies, or even my place of work.

~ Another important thing that was taught was that every protest had to be aimed at the right authority. Any candle-light marches or demonstrations should be accompanied by a Charter of Demands (CoD) to the relevant authority in the Government. Else, protests serve very little purpose.

Economic ideas

~ He taught us to think about the long term. Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen calls Babasaheb his 'Guru' in economics

~ We need to generate our own revenue rather than depending on Brahminical government or society to do that.

Social ideas

~ He taught us to stand by the community in good and bad times.

~ He wanted us to gain strategic positions where we work that will enable progress.

~ He told us to educate the community and bring about social awareness. What I have also learnt is people in the community are at different stages in their awareness of Babasaheb and his vision. I have accepted that I need to engage in discussions at different levels of consciousness accordingly.

~ The term "social justice" is based upon equality, liberty and fraternity of all human beings. The aim of social justice is to remove all kinds of inequalities based upon caste, race, sex, power, position, and wealth. The social justice brings equal distribution of the social, political, and economic resources of the community.

For me, understanding Babasaheb means not just celebrating his birth anniversary or remembering him on his death anniversary (which is important, of course), but considering the larger goals of his mission. For example, I hope that by next year the Caste Census is released. I hope a stricter act is passed in Universities to stop discrimination

against Dalit-Bahujan students. I hope my OBC friends understand how brahminism works, and they also come out openly and support Babasaheb. I wish there are no more cases like Rohith Vemula or Delta Meghwal.

Babasaheb makes me aspire to be like him. I feel a part of Babasaheb in me when I do my bit for annihilating caste and building an equal society. I feel strong and purposeful. He makes me feel that I am re-born every morning, and what I do today is what matters the most.

With this I would like to wish everyone best wishes for Ambedkar Jayanti again and request all to read more of our literature. There is an ocean of our books and resources out there, and we can never complain that there are not enough books of Babasaheb or Dalit literature available. With the advent of technology, it has become easier than ever. Remember our icons and remember Babasaheb! Jai Bhim!

4

Discovering Babasaheb Outside the System

Ambedkar Helped Me Embrace the 'Emotional' within the Rational

Akhil Kang

I think I have lost count of the number of times I have felt immensely guilty of getting what I have got because of my caste. I remember sitting in my university classes, people looking directly at my face and saying 'some lower caste' individuals do not deserve to be here, because technically they are economically better than even many upper caste brahmins. I did not know how to respond then. I was new to a law school environment, a big reputed one at that. I was extremely intimidated by my peers around me, who knew how to spell it right with their superbly pruned dictions. I stayed quiet. It was only later that I realized how deeply I had internalized the shame that I felt about where I come from, how apologetic I should be based on people's assumptions about my competence and constantly justify my position of being where I am.

There have been innumerable times when my batch mates told me how I 'never looked like one,' simultaneously and not-so-subtly, pointing at my lower class, Dalit batch mate who hails from Bihar: a boy who, in their view, clearly fits the criteria of 'poor SC boy who needs reservation.' How much it pained me to hear that! I come from an untouchable caste of Chamars from Jalandhar. I have been extremely privileged to be born in a family where my grandfather stepped out of his father's occupation and earned enough to pay for my father's education who in turn became a civil servant. Does that mean that I should feel sorry about an upper class, upper caste person's accusations of my non-credibility of having reached a place which is so conveniently appropriated by men and women of unquestioned privilege? Was that unease I saw in their eyes when I would not just silently suffer the multiple disadvantages that were thrown at me?

I remember how, as a child, my parents took me to Guru Ravi Dass Ji's gurudwara and explained to me how he is 'our' guru. I remember being

confused as to why he is not counted among the ten Gurus when he is evidently a Guru himself. I remember being confused by following rituals such as taking my shoes off, bending down just the way I saw upper caste individuals do when we were very much opposed to the way they perpetuated caste oppression by such exclusionary practices. What struck me most, and still does sometimes, is the level of secrecy that came with my caste. I was constantly reminded by my family to not wear my caste on my sleeve. How doing so, would attract unwanted attention. I get angry when I am required by my family members to touch my elders' feet. I get angry when my parents forbid me from eating beef, of telling me to shut up about my caste when I refuse to name a fictitious number from a general list to avoid conversation about reservation list.

Much of my courage (or just plain common sense) to not shy away from confrontations with my daily realities with respect to my caste came from me dealing with bullying because of being an out-of-the-closet homosexual. I am a cis-gendered man and identify my sexual orientation as gay. I never went through any questioning phase in my life. I just knew since first grade and even before that, that I was interested in people of my own gender. Not sexually of course...there was a sense of higher attachment with boys my age.

A very big part of me that could face caste oppression stems from the strength that I found through my comfort of being in my own skin; by respecting who I am, regardless of how everyone around me mocked me, joked about me, bullied me, for being different or girl-ish or sissy or a *chhakka*. I remember being in sixth grade and terribly upset about being mentally tortured by my school mates but forced to console myself because I just could not ever feel comfortable about discussing it with my mother. Because if I would tell my mother what they called me, she would enquire about why would they call me such names and eventually connect the dots with my orientation.

I remember even being abused by my cousin for acting like a girl and bringing shame to my entire family. But I decided long time back in my life that I would never let anyone make me feel bad about myself.

Slowly, while growing up, I came to terms with my caste. What supposed impurity meant. How I should never tell my friends what my caste is. 'Why?' I asked. "*Bas nahi batana. Humain woh bura samajhte hain.*" Thus, I hid my caste (besides keeping quiet about my orientation). Not only did I try to look and seem masculine, I would also try to imitate my upper caste friends' fascination with their cultures.

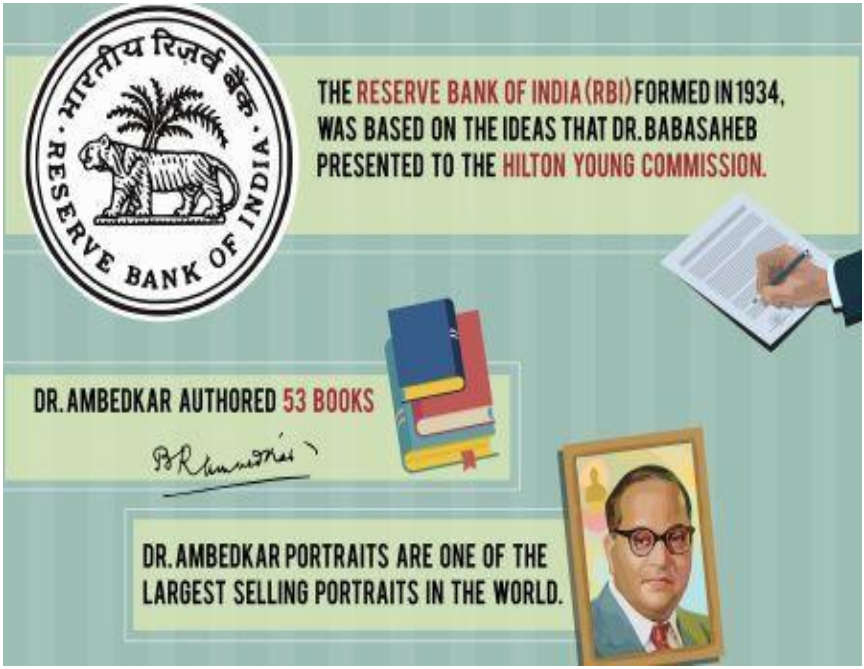
As I grew up, it became much easier for me to 'come out' about my sexuality, but not my caste. I guess it just became easier for me to take the struggles at my own pace. I realized that I was trying so hard to fight the shame attached to me being gay that I somehow overlooked to fight the shame that is attached to my caste. I began to accept my caste within my engagement with my sexuality. I realized Ambedkar had so much to offer not just to the lower castes but marginalized people across the spectrum. Annihilating caste by challenging the very foundation of the Hindu society helped me to come to terms with attacking the heteronormativity and assumed notions of femininity and masculinity. Ambedkar and his readings not only helped me challenge oppression at various degrees, but it also helped me embrace the 'emotional' within the rational.

While talking about the Gandhi-Ambedkar debate, one of the points in which some analyse those deliberations, is how Ambedkar demolished the opposing side's arguments, one by one, rationally. For me, on the other hand, the very fact that he was so emotional about the cause, that emotional rationality carried a stupendous importance. When people around me dismiss my disengagement with law and my 'dildo-shoving-feminism,' I feel in no sense non-emotional about my feminism, caste and LGBT or diluting the baggage that these movements come with just to please the comfort of the listener or the opposition. My caste taught me how not to be uncomfortable with me being emotional and dismissing them in the name of making rational and public pleasing arguments.

In discussions, which are perpetually lost in unearthing each other's dispositions, Ambedkar is supremely relevant and will be for infinity, to help us deconstruct the taken for granted structures around us. The

intersectionality of experiences, if not educating us about multiple marginalizations, also taught us to be more inter-disciplinary in our approach to issues.

Did You Know – 4



Infographic by Saurav Arya

For more, go to page 128.

Babasaheb: Unravelling and Rebuilding My World

Sruthi Herbert

I cannot recall the exact day or time. It was one day during my master's course that I opened my reading list and started reading *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*.

This was primarily because I was curious. I had never known before that Dr Ambedkar was a prolific writer. Ambedkarism had never entered my realm of thinking, and indeed, I was not even familiar with the word until then. My knowledge about Dr B R Ambedkar was at the lower primary level: as the father of the constitution, but I had not even processed what that meant. What a herculean task it is to lead a team that framed a constitution for a country as diverse and huge as India which had just been freed from colonization! The magnificence of such a task was never mentioned at the school-level. I suppose the teachers themselves never appreciated it.

Ambedkar never entered my consciousness as a writer. Indeed, he was non-existent in the intellectual and cultural universe that I grew up in. I knew Marx from a young age. Meanwhile, I studied in a Hindu school, and of course, I knew the Bhagavat Gita, Sanskrit, Karnatic music, lots of Bhajans, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. I recited revolutionary humanist poetry in my mother tongue. My father was fond of these lines from a famous Malayalam poem: *Eeshwaranalla Manthrikanalla Njan, Pachamannin Manushyathvamaanu Njan*. 'I am neither God, nor a Magician; I am humanity, made of raw earth.' My parents never came in the way of my religious explorations as a child, and I was as familiar and at ease in a savarna Hindu cultural world as I was at home, where we had strong Christian ethics but no practice of religion. More importantly, I saw around me, the mismatch between the ideological Marxist world and the Hindu way of life and how a resolution is accomplished, and how the Savarna Hindu cultural world and the

Marxist comrade could co-exist harmoniously. In this secular revolutionary world, there was no Ambedkar.

I was quite naive when I spotted Dr B R Ambedkar's name in our reading list. I think that semester also had readings about the revolutionary paradise that I am from, describing how that state of bliss had been reached, and what the economic problems were with this state. My reason for reading 'Castes in India' was curiosity; even though I was an avid reader, I had never previously known Dr B R Ambedkar as a writer.

Now, I remember exactly what happened as I started reading 'Castes in India.' A story was being told. I was reading about a people, a country, a world which I knew, explained in a new light. I know I sat and read it at one go. I read it like I would normally have read a crime thriller, transfixed, because it was explaining everything I had known until now as a puzzle to be solved, approached logically, to reveal everything about a massive fraud and to shine light on the truth in a very rational manner. I remember reading about Sati, Child marriage, the surplus man and the surplus woman, and feeling the nerve endings in my brain explode with sunshine. Sometimes I stopped because I had to breathe and get more air. I do not think it took me very long to read it the first time, although the reading of it afterwards has inevitably taken me longer. This was my moment of illumination. This was when I started becoming a failed Hindu project.

This was how I discovered Ambedkar, and how my world started to change. The savarna universe I had gotten comfortable with during my education, it did not matter anymore after I read Babasaheb Ambedkar the first time. I wondered why nobody had told me about this towering person before. It was from my classmates that I started learning about the vast world Babasaheb's thoughts had created. A classmate would call him 'Baba,' as his father, and this deeply emotional connect to a thinker was something I was witnessing for the first time. As my engagement with his thoughts progressed, and as new understandings began forming, the Ambedkar Cartoon controversy vis-à-vis the

NCERT text book happened. This was a defining moment, when I saw in every possible way, the violence of the defenders of that cartoon. If a teacher in school was not able to explain to students, ever, what being the father of the constitution meant, what being the drafter of the defining text of our legal existence in our own country was, how were they going to explain a cartoon in the way it was meant to be taught? I had studied an anti-woman verse from Manusmriti in school, and to unsuspecting naïve students, the teacher had said that this verse, much contested as being anti-woman, was not really anti-woman, and had rendered his interpretation which, in our unsuspecting early teens I believed. Thus, Manusmriti was introduced, as a pro-woman treatise. The power of teachers to shape the mind is indeed huge.

The next critical moment was when Arundhati Roy wrote about Ambedkar. The sheer audacity was shocking, because my exposure to Ambedkarite friends, thoughts, and their convictions had taught me about the distance I must travel to understand Babasaheb, his writings and the new world and meanings he created. The material that Arundhati Roy had touched was not just about a person and his writing, but a social, cultural, intellectual, and spiritual world that he enabled, and was inhabited by millions. If the ignorance was glaring, the disrespect was shocking.

So, what does Babasaheb mean to me now?

To me, Babasaheb Ambedkar is an on-going journey. He does not illuminate the path standing alone. He is guided by Savitrimai and Jotiba. He holds up a torch, and many others stand beside him, ahead of him, behind him. I must find the way. But until I do, Babasaheb is my rationale-master. He is my rich lineage ancestor. He is my reference index. He enables me to discover myself, and he tells me more about my history, and therefore about my present and future, than most other people would.

Reaching Babasaheb through the Ambedkarite Community

Chandana Chandragiri

I was born and brought up in a metropolitan city, Bangalore. I attended one of the most elite schools in Bangalore. I never felt like I belonged there. I always felt like some sort of a loser growing up. Most people did not talk to me or even touch me in school. Even the one friend I had by the end of school openly expressed shame at the fact that she was friends with me. She said to me that she did not know why she was friends with me because I always embarrassed her and I was so boy-crazy. She told me that one of her other friends asked her how she could stay friends with me. Earlier, around second grade, I had a friend who told me that we could be friends but only if I promised that I would not tell anyone else that we were friends. So, I promised her that I would not.

I did not understand any of the discrimination or humiliation I went through each day growing up. I grew up believing there was something inherently wrong with me. The teachers and students treated me like I was stupid and I believed that I was extremely stupid. I started blaming myself for the way I was treated. More than myself, I started blaming my parents for the way I was treated. I thought if they were modern like the other parents, I would not have to go through any of this. I thought they were as stupid as I was. I started looking down on my parents and all my family. I hated everything about myself. I hated the way I looked, and hated that I could not articulate as well in English. I detached myself from everything that my family had passed on to me, like my mother tongue. I learnt to be more and more like my schoolmates. I learnt to speak like them, dress like them, eat the food they ate, and do what they did.

It was only when I had to fill application forms for pre-university (11th class) that I realized I belonged to the SC category. From what I

had learnt in my school I just knew that meant that I belonged to the untouchable community. I knew that was something I should be ashamed of. Now that I think about it though, I knew the caste of most of the brahmin and other dominant kids but my parents had to hide my own caste from me.

When I was doing my Bachelors, I learnt more about caste discrimination and caste atrocities. Even then, I did not think caste was something that impacted me in anyway.

I joined Masters in Delhi last year. I joined Ambedkar University which is known for its liberal and progressive ideals. I thought I would get introduced to concepts like caste and Ambedkar but obviously, like in any other liberal university, it did not happen. I was quickly becoming disillusioned with the liberal/progressive space and the left. On the surface, they seemed to care so much about social justice but I quickly realized all of that was a façade but I did not understand why.

Around this time, while talking about caste, a friend of mine introduced me to Round Table India. Through Round Table India I found an entire world of Ambedkarites that I did not know existed. I started reading as much as I could on Round Table India and Savari. I added almost every Ambedkarite I could find on Facebook. I would diligently follow all of them on Facebook and read all their posts. I would be on Facebook day and night and I would spend all my classes on my phone, reading these articles because this was this the education I was looking for.

Through these discoveries, I could make sense of my life experiences. I realized how everything in my life has been influenced by caste. People refused to touch me in school. That's as basic as untouchability gets. When I was doing my Bachelors, my friend pointed out, that this may have something do with my caste and I refused to believe it. Last year, for the first time in twenty one years, I was able to acknowledge that what happened to me in school and a lot of things out of school was because of my caste. I was able to acknowledge that what happened to

me in school was not because I was some sort of a loser but because we live in a deeply sick, casteist society. I realized what happened to me was discrimination and I need to mention again how hard it was for me to accept that.

It is like I could, for the first time, reach Babasaheb through the Ambedkarite community and make sense of my life. It's also for the first time in my life that I found a community that I belonged to. I felt like there are people out there who could understand what I had been through because they had been through similar experiences. For me, Babasaheb and the Ambedkarite community are deeply intertwined. I do not see how one can exist without the other. I would not know what to do without them. Without this community, I do not think I would have ever been able to make sense of my life. They have empowered me by providing the knowledge to understand the society that we live in and in turn to understand who I am.

Thus Ekalavya Shot One More Arrow.

Artist: Syama Sundar Unnamati (Syam Cartoonist)

Babasaheb Set the Bar High!

Lakshmi Parvathy

My earliest encounter with caste was when my immediate family showed discomfort in disclosing our caste. The curiosity of the rest of the world did not end there, and they kept asking directly and indirectly about our caste and we kept laughing it off. When asked why we had to be elusive about it, I was told by my parents that life would not be the same if others knew that we were Dalits. Anticipating hostility and ridicule, I conformed to the rule of not disclosing my caste identity. Although my caste details were disclosed as a technicality when I was admitted to school and I had to stand up when names were called out and stipends for SC students handed out, I sought solace in the belief that fellow students from other divisions would not know about my caste.

But people's curiosity never ended and they eventually found out! Speculations and discussions were held within our family as to how the information leaked. May be someone had met an old relative of ours? Or maybe, my school documents revealed it? But surprisingly enough, we enjoyed a bit of relief as we were told, *'You do not look like Dalits.'* Consoled by that small distinction, we stood apart, different from the 'Dalit-looking Dalits.' It was rather astonishing to the world, as to how my parents could own ten cents of land and build a house in it, while Krishnan Panar, a person from our own community, still sang *Panapattu* in the month of *Karkidakam* to make his ends meet. Although I enjoyed for some years, a comfort in knowing that I was an outsider in my caste community, this started posing problems in the years of my under graduate studies. That was when my political self could not stand any longer, the deep-rooted caste prejudice when someone said that '*You do not look like a Dalit'* or that I had acquired the qualities of an 'upper' caste person despite being a Dalit.

I was one of the many beneficiaries of affirmative action, which gave me, like many others, an opportunity to pursue my graduation in one of

the premier institutes of the country. But getting an admission only marked the beginning of learning the art of survival and succeeding. The quality of life spent there was more like a constant struggle with many concerns, including issues with ease of communication, the ability to build a reliable social network, redefining the sense of self-worth, ability and feasibility to pursue my interests and the like.

After the tragic death of research scholar Rohith Vemula, his words triggered intense debates on casteism in institutions of higher education. Discourses were reduced to a binary of an institution versus Dalits. But there are nuances to it, certainly. For instance, in my experience as a Dalit student, the institution alone was not the important player. My peers, cliques and crowds too played an important role. Here, I would like to borrow from Pierre Bourdieu, eminent French Sociologist, to explain how that happens.

Bourdieu argues that in the education system, language plays a central role in reproducing social inequalities from one generation to the next. Bourdieu looks analytically at an intersection of regional differences in French and standard language. He says that, a student who comes from the provinces to Paris to do the University studies feels intimidated amongst peers. Bourdieu enquires into what exactly this intimidation is and where it exists. He describes it as 'symbolic violence' that does not imply an act of intimidation on the part of the standard French Speaker. But the standard French speaker's skill to handle the language and her reaction to the provincial dialect make the newcomer feel intimidated. Bourdieu adds that the non-standard speaker is involved in co-creating the intimidation in the sense that "the intimidation can only be exerted on a person predisposed to feel it, whereas others will ignore it. The cause of timidity lies in the relation between the situation or the intimidating person (who may deny any intimidating intention) and the person intimidated, or rather, between the social conditions of production of each of them."[20]

[20]Bourdieu (1991:51) in Joseph, John Earl. Language and politics. Edinburgh University Press, 2006. Page.47

Here, Bourdieu is emphasising on the role of language in reproducing social inequalities. The role of other factors such as cultural capital which includes skills, mannerisms, material belongings, accent etc. and the social capital which includes reliable social networks and the sense of self-worth of the individual cannot be undermined. Thus, all these factors add on to define inequality at the outset and additionally the symbolic violence serves to reproduce the social inequalities further. Although caste need not be the sole category that can be employed to understand symbolic violence, it is an important category with which one can understand the ramifications of symbolic violence. This intimidation and symbolic violence has the potential to make individuals silent, fearful of speaking up, further alienate the self, internalise silences and validate the internalisation in a context where social inequalities are reproduced across generations. It might be easily possible in the case of caste because for centuries now Dalits were made silent, not allowed to speak, not allowed to stand in the way, in the vicinity and had to hide in the presence of upper caste people. I was certainly intimidated in my experience as a Dalit student, and it took time for introspection and inspiration from Babasaheb to speak up about it. Babasaheb wrote in the first issue of the *Mook Nayak* – The Leader of the Silent, that

The effect of social inequality on the people called untouchables has been devastating. The vast masses of untouchables are undoubtedly sunk deep into the confluence of feebleness (helplessness), poverty and ignorance. Meanness produced by their slavery with which they have been used to for many years is keeping them backward. They think that the wretched condition in which they are placed is their lot and it is god ordained. This thinking can be removed from their mind only by imparting knowledge (education) to them. But the costly education is a purchasable commodity and the untouchables because of their poverty are unable to purchase it and even if few of them are able to purchase it they are not allowed to enter the schools because the stigma of untouchability is permanently attached to them… The stigma of untouchability has restricted their freedom of profession and therefore, their efforts to remove their poverty are not fructifying… The untouchables have no knowledge (education) because they are poor and they are powerless because they have no

knowledge. This is a correct logic but it should not be forgotten that it reduces the importance of those who are fighting against the practice of untouchability. The real humanity lies in breaking the barriers.[21]

Here, Babasaheb was making a call for sharing Dalit experiences, suggesting remedies against the injustice done to Dalits and to discuss the ways and means for our progress in future.

Reg. No. B. 1430

जाहिरातींचे दर :— कालमच्या दर ओळीस पहिल्या वेळी ५ आणे. दुसऱ्या वेळी ४आ. कायम २॥ आणे.

मूकनायक

वर्गणीचा दर वार्षिक इ. ह. सह २॥ रुपये.

काय करूं आतां धरुनियां भीड । निःशंक हे तोंड वाजविलें ।।
नव्हे जगीं कोणी मुकीयांचा जाण । सार्थक लाजून नव्हे हित ।।

वर्ष १ ले.] मुंबई, शनिवार ता. ३१ आगेवारी १९२० [अंक १ ला

Mook Nayak Header

The attempt here has been to engage with the so-called 'privilege' of not looking like a 'Dalit,' debate it, understand it, gain insights from it and act more sensitively. As I talked to more people from my community and outside of it, I found it even more important to write this piece. People outside the community were unaware about the nuances of experience and the people from community were not open to discuss it – possibly being very cautious, afraid of the world becoming even more unfair to them. Or, they want to stay in their place, enjoying the little 'distinctions' that might have been bestowed upon them.

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[21] *From the pages of Mook Nayak, published 14 April 2015, Round Table India* Taken from the first editorial written by Babasaheb originally written in Marathi for the very first issue of Mook Nayak published in January 1920. This translation was first published in July 2010 by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Research Institute in Social Growth, Kolhapur. Translated by Dr B R Kamble.

Babasaheb was a scholar as much as a man of action. His writings and speeches presented a hitherto-unprecedented analysis about caste, its origin, mechanism, development. He was also an impeccable leader and an exemplar. Through his deep reading, clarity of thought and arguments he encountered the oppressive caste practices. Emphasising the importance of education, Babasaheb said that, "The backward classes have come to realize that after all education is the greatest material benefit for which they can fight. We may forego material benefits of civilization but we cannot forego our rights and opportunities to reap the benefits of the highest education fully. That the importance of this question from the point of view of the backward classes who have just realized that without education their existence is not safe."[22]

He might have suffered a lot during his time as a student with more overt forms of discrimination. Yet, he succeeded in attaining very good education and set the bar high for anyone to follow.

[22] Vasant Moon, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches Vol. 2. Government of Maharashtra (1982)

Towards Ambedkar's Ideas, A Journey of Self-transformation

Suravee Nayak

The call for articles on the theme "What Ambedkar Means to Me" made me look back at my life, and reflect upon what Babasaheb Ambedkar meant to me. In modern India, it is widely believed that the caste system does not exist anymore. The 'progressive' society that I lived in took me into its confidence and I was made to believe that despite being a Dalit, I will not be treated like one. However, I was made to realize gradually by the same society that after all, I am a Dalit and caste is my undeniable and unchangeable identity. Although I was unaware of the conventional caste practices of rural India, there were three major incidents in my life which made me aware of the modern forms and practices of caste and made me re-think.

When I was in 8th standard, in 'History of India' lesson, we were taught one day about the 'ancient' practice of caste system along with its mythological explanation, about the various parts of Brahma's body from where each caste was born. During lunch break, that became the topic of discussion amongst us students. A friend started asking others about the castes they belonged to. Some proudly said 'we are Brahmins,' with utmost gratification, some said 'we are Kshatriyas' and some said 'we are Vaishya.' When my turn came, I was stunned and speechless. I did not know how and what to reply. Before I could gather my strength to say I am a Dalit, my good friend said, "Oh you cannot be a Shudra, Shudras are untouchables, so you must be a Vaishya?" I was scared to death with the thought of revealing my identity. If I revealed my caste, what would they think of me and how will they treat me from then onwards? Will they accept me as their friend? Will they continue to share their lunch boxes with me? Will they give me their notes? Will I be the butt of their jokes? I just nodded my head.

Years later, I was in the first year of my graduation, one of my dearest friends committed suicide. She was in her early twenties, a Dalit woman from a very well-to-do family, who was in a relationship with an upper caste man who made her believe that her caste did not matter to him. But later, this man refused to marry her saying his mother would commit suicide if he did. By this time, the societal policing had begun and my friend was branded a woman of bad character. Even her own parents did not provide any moral support and courage and accused her of bringing a bad name to the family. Consequently, she decided to leave this world which looked down on her identity of being a Dalit woman. Due to the fear of ostracism from society, her parents could not take any action against the upper caste man.

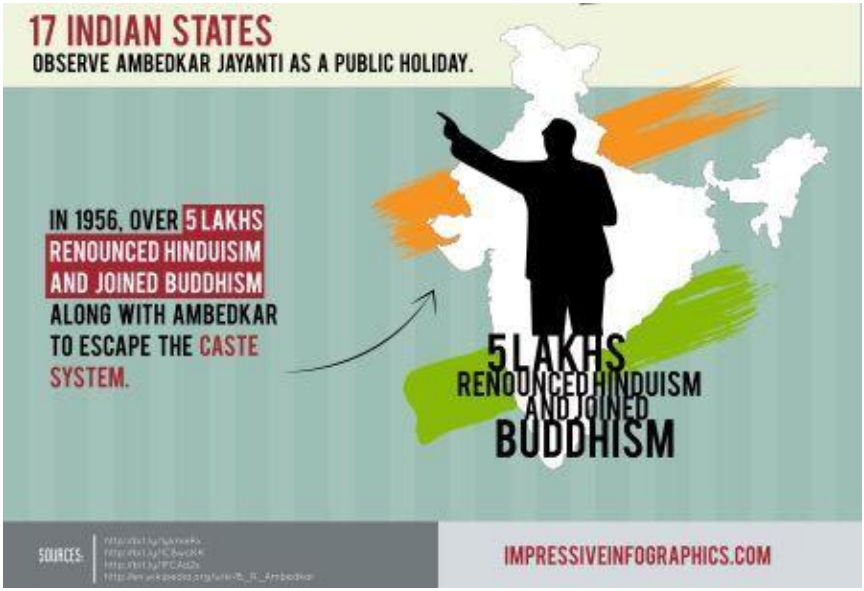
The third incident exposed me to the reality of caste practices in academia. When I joined for Masters in a top university in Odisha as a candidate in the 'general' category, I was asked by an upper caste female classmate how, despite belonging to the SC category, I managed to secure high marks in the entrance examination. Some of my classmates even said that they cannot believe I belong to the SC category! When I cleared the National Eligibility Test (NET) in the very first attempt, I was made to feel that I did not deserve the success. One classmate, an upper caste female, believed that I could crack NET only because of reservation and not otherwise, I lacked the merit to crack NET in my first attempt. That classmate still holds the same view, even after I got admission in a top institute in India for my M.Phil/PhD program.

When I joined my current institute, I did not know much about the Ambedkarite discourse. I was happy to study in such a reputed place. Here, some of my Ambedkarite friends helped me understand Ambedkar's work and ideas on social justice, and to critically view the Brahminic hegemony. My understanding of caste was very narrow until I met these friends. My notion of caste exclusion was restricted to the act of beef-eating but gradually I learned that it is much more than that. The experiences of Dalit-Bahujan students were varied and were different from what I had experienced but we shared the same pain.

Like many others, I never used to challenge the hierarchical division of people based on caste. After reading Babasaheb's Annihilation of Caste, I understood that the caste system is an unfair and inhumane practice by the upper castes to subjugate a few sections and exploit them as much as they can. Like most Hindus, I used to celebrate all Hindu festivals, thinking that the celebration is in the spirit of unity and brotherhood. Later, various readings and discussions with my Ambedkarite friends enabled me to be critical of the Hindu culture. Then I started following articles on Round Table India. These helped me understand that despite reservations, Dalit-Bahujan students are denied their right to education as well as a life of dignity in the name of merit in many educational institutions. Moreover, I felt attached to the people who penned down their experiences inside institutional spaces.

Later, the Bahujan Discourse group formed by some Dalit-Bahujan students at the institute was another eye opener to my way of thinking and approach. We discuss about caste atrocities, caste-class, Ambedkar's writings, and intersectionality of caste with gender and other social structures. Due to these deliberations, I have realized the importance of Ambedkar's ideas for the empowerment of Dalit women. Being a Dalit woman, besides caste, patriarchy is something which I struggle with and fight against in my daily life. However, the hope of self-transformation through constant and continuous engagement keeps me going. So, with Ambedkar's vision in my mind and his ideas in my heart, I walk with my fellow students towards social justice.

Did You Know – 5



Infographic by Saurav Arya

The Joy in Teaching about Babasaheb

Sanam Roohi Reddy

Between 2014 and 2016, I spent long hours of my days sitting on the first-floor lounge of the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) library, either working on my thesis, or publications, or reading something. The relaxed seating arrangements, beautiful trees that peer at you from three sides of the lounge, and, above all, the portrait of Babasaheb Ambedkar made me give up the serious and staid ground floor reading room for this first-floor lounge. While I am hugely privileged to have access to the library, my thoughts do go to the blood and sweat of Dalit-Bahujans spent on building that humongous library.

For many first-generation university graduates like me, the journey towards a PhD studentship and the journey during the PhD to get that coveted degree, require more than hard work and enthusiasm for the subject to keep us going. The doctoral journey often kills creativity, crushes the initial enthusiasm, make students brutally aware of structures of privilege and oppression, and in some cases, defeat the student thoroughly. What many of us then need is tremendous amount of courage and inspiration to not give up and reach the finishing line. The last two years of my PhD were the toughest for me, and I drew my inspiration from three or four sources. One of which was definitely Babasaheb - as if his portrait in the library lounge was silently cheering me on, and firmly asking me to push myself a little bit more.

We all know Babasaheb as the architect of our sacred book the 'Indian Constitution,' which is also the point where my formal education about him pulled a full stop. I have an Honours and a Masters' degree in Political Science from the University of Calcutta and to think that he never figured as either a political thinker or architect of modern India in our courses feels not only like a betrayal but a very well thought out

exclusion. Though I never had a chance to examine what justifications the Bengali intellectual cohort would have proffered to us for this, I got an indication of it once when a Bengali Brahmin Marxist bhadrolok who was also sensitive to the question of caste mentioned with an air of finality –'Ambedkar was after all a liberal!' It really does not matter that we were taught about Adam Smith and Michael Sandel and everyone in between them. My education had caste-blinded me to such an extent that when I was gleaning over scores of published materials for a compendium on *Key Texts on Social Justice in India* in 2007, caste did not feature in it.[23] For some reason, religion, class and tribes were the only acceptable forms of 'identity' that could be talked of. Why exclude caste then, could be anyone's guess. Casteism you say? What was that? After all, we were made to believe caste was the remnant of the old order, bound to disappear with advanced Capitalism.

Understandably then, my initiation to the world of Babasaheb was late. It does not mean I was not aware of caste. In one of my early publications, I had explained how *beradaris* (or *jati* like groups) was one of the fault lines among Calcutta Muslims.[24] My own upper caste family was 'progressive' enough to emphasise that we should marry good pious hardworking Muslims, never mind the *beradari* and even class position of these prospective suitors. I never thought of caste much myself; but it does not mean I did not unselfconsciously practice it. I hope to write more about it in another post sometime soon. Suffice to say here that for a quarter of a century, I had spread my ignorance too far to not realise that caste leaves an imprint on our lives in profound (both material and immaterial) ways.

I chose to marry a non-Muslim, very much in love with a man who held the promise of taking me away from the rigidities of conservative Islam

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[23] Roohi. S and R. Samaddar ed. 2009. *Key Texts on Social Justice in India*, Sage Publications: New Delhi

[24] Roohi. S. 2010. *Minority within Minorities: Muslim Women in Kolkata* in S Bhaumik edited Counter Gaze: Media, Migrants, Minorities, Frontpage Publication: Kolkata

I faced in Calcutta. Again, I did not think about caste while doing this; the fact that I would be marrying someone with a Hindu name was enough to give me sleepless nights with questions such as - Am I right in doing this? Will my family suffer because of this? Will I be cut off from my 'culture'? However, it would be far-fetched to say that my would-be husband's class position did not matter. He was an MBA, after all. My own caste bias was working at a subterranean level, because by choosing someone from a particular class, I was by default determining his status (which in India is by and large determined by one's caste location and where caste often overlaps with class or becomes a vehicle to achieve upward social mobility).

It was after my marriage that I encountered caste as a way of being and belonging more directly. I was a quick learner and started seeing caste in everything myself – from friendships one preferred to make, to the clothes one chose to wear. For my PhD that started in 2010 too, I had decided to work on caste. Till then, I associated caste only with practice, behaviour and discrimination. While I was never an 'anti-reservationist,' I hardly thought of caste as a base on which the political economy of the sub-continent functioned, premised on meticulous social, cultural economic and political exclusion, alienation and degradation of the majority by a minority.

But it was in early 2011 when I first read Babasaheb's original work – *Annihilation of Caste* (I needed no annotation to read it) – as part of my compulsory reading for the course *Sociology of India.* It is one of those rare non-fictions that shook me to the very core. The only thought that kept crossing my mind was how brave, sharp and articulate Babasaheb was, and how profound! 2011 was my year of 'awakening' in many senses. In August that year, I saw the film 'Death of Merit' and heard Anoop Kumar speak. My interest in Babasaheb only peaked thereafter. Befriending him on Facebook and then following others associated with Round Table India, including Anu Ramdas and Kuffir taught me what all the years of training could not. They are my true teachers and I thank them for their friendship.

In 2015, as a part time teacher, I taught an M.A. course on Political Thinkers of Modern India in a college, I had to teach my students about Babasaheb! I cannot express the joy I felt in teaching about him to that class! To date, I consider the following my greatest achievement –that year, when my MA class of twenty students were asked to write an essay on Gandhi and Ambedkar and analyse who played a greater role in transforming India, nineteen out of twenty chose to side with Babasaheb. Today as a full-time teacher, whenever possible, nothing gave me more satisfaction than taking Babasaheb to my class.

While I have still a long way to go to familiarise myself with all his writings, I consider myself an Ambedkarite who is aware of how avarnas and pasmandas have subsidised my life. Babasaheb continues to give me inspiration and courage to not give up, and in my own small way I try to follow his dictum – to Educate, Organize, Agitate!

Babasaheb for me is like an Inner Voice

Madhura Raut

It was not my family or my school that introduced Ambedkar to me. It was because of my friends, both classmates and Facebook friends, that I got introduced to Babasaheb Ambedkar. It is a fact that I never felt a strong connection with Babasaheb, Jotiba Phule and Savitri Bai in school and never heard about these three leaders in my family. I felt that connection only after I came to Pune for my graduation.

I heard stories in my school about Bapu and Bal Gangadhar Tilak but not about Babasaheb. There would be competitions in my school like reciting *Manache Shlok* (Sanskrit prayers) or elocution competition about Tilak but Babasaheb was completely absent there. Babasaheb would be remembered only on one day -14th April - and this would be a holiday for school.

It was my best friend in school from whom I first heard about *Babasaheb* Ambedkar, not just Ambedkar. She had once told me that they do not celebrate Diwali or any other Hindu festivals. I was surprised to hear that. I used to think that Nav-Bauddha was just another religion like Hinduism. We were told in our school that India is the nation where all people celebrate festivals of different religions. Then why was my friend not celebrating Diwali, I asked her. It did not occur to me to ask myself why I was not celebrating Bhimjayanti with her.

Later, I did my Junior College in Mumbai. But there also, Ambedkar was never a topic in our discussions. Then I came to Pune for my graduation where I made more friends. In the initial days, during discussions about society, culture etc. I noticed that one of my friends had a different perspective, something we would have never thought of earlier. It was from him that we started to hear about Babasaheb Ambedkar. This friend too was Nav-Buddhist. Initially, I did not take his opinions too seriously because I did not know enough about

Babasaheb Ambedkar. At that time, I was also of the opinion that it was women who knew more about culture and hence his opinions might be wrong. Eventually I came across some readings, group discussions in our Socio-Club in college, and some posts on Facebook which made me want to know more about Babasaheb Ambedkar. I once tried to read the original texts by Ambedkar, but at that time I could not understand them. Even today, I still have not read any original text by Babasaheb Ambedkar. But I am trying to know and understand more and more about Babasaheb through all possible means – be it discussions with friends, teachers, posts and pages on Facebook, seminars etc.

Now, I am doing my post-graduation in Gender, Culture and Development at the Women's Studies Centre, Savitribai Phule Pune University. I feel it is true that feminisms in India cannot be understood without understanding Ambedkar's views on women's emancipation. It is the standpoint of the women at the bottom of the hierarchy, of the women who are the most oppressed, that we need when we talk about women's emancipation and empowerment. Freedom and justice to these women means freedom and justice to all. Patriarchy alone is not our enemy; it is hetero-normative capitalism-enabled brahmanical patriarchy.

Though coming from an OBC community, I sometimes wonder why I never heard about Jotiba and Savitribai or about Ambedkar at home. Ideal 'Dalit-Bahujanwad' makes sense only in texts. The reality is very different. I have come across some comments and arguments at home and in my community which looks down upon Dalits or 'Harijans,' a term many prefer to use. I too have been trapped in these prejudices, if not in my conscious self, in the unconscious. I think that these caste prejudices in the unconscious are no less than explicit caste discrimination, caste violence and hence even our unconscious needs continuous self-interrogation. Posts by Ambedkarites on Facebook and lectures in my department both have influenced me to look at everyday

Caste and Gender issues with a perspective different from the one I used to hold.

Knowing about Babasaheb and understanding his ideology has not been an easy task for me because it involves a lot of unlearning. And when you do that, you feel as though all through your life, you have had false pride, false beliefs, false values, false principles and false knowledge which made you judge and perceive everything wrongly. It makes you think from the perspective of the oppressed and marginalised who possess a better knowledge of structural hierarchy and the means to challenge it. It makes you question your common-sense knowledge, opinion, and even the choices you make in your everyday life. It is about acknowledging your privileges while talking with others, about others. It is about reflecting upon your 'personal' which holds, sometimes unknowingly and sometimes knowingly, biases, stereotypes and prejudices. It is about respecting the dignity of one's own self and every individual. It is about engaging in the movement for establishing an equal and just society. It is about a constant process of self-interrogation.

Babasaheb for me is like an inner voice which keeps reminding me of this process of self-interrogation. For me, this is one of the ways to keep Babasaheb alive, to contribute to the world he dreamt of.

Jai Bhim! Jai Savitri! Jai Jotiba!

5

Anti- Caste Assertions and Ambedkarite Thought

Babasaheb Ambedkar: A Thunderbolt Striking the System

Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy

If I were a tree
The bird wouldn't ask me
Before it built its nest
What caste I am.

Anti-caste literature from members of the outcastes and lower castes in Karnataka has a very long history. The phrase 'Dalit literature' is often used to describe writings by Dalits since the 1970s, with a peak during the 1990s. As a form of protest literature, it continues, and no new literary movement is on the anvil, at least in Kannada. A large posse of Dalit literature is available in almost all major Indian languages. But, whether it has helped the society, the people, is the moot question. Strangely, each language gained momentum in a specific genre, like for instance, poetry in Kannada, short stories in Tamil, autobiographies in Marathi and so on. It took a long time for the mainstream litterateurs to recognise it. I am happy to note that the elite and the erudite are shedding their prejudices and taking serious note of what is happening here. This cannot be denied because if we take literature as the reflection of life, this literature concerns nearly a quarter of the Indian populace.

Dalit literature could be described as the mouthpiece of the marginalised, told in pastoral grandiloquence. This is not literature for the critics to evaluate at leisure, only to say that there is no art in it, although it is rich with native similes and metaphors. By and large, Dalit literature has espoused the negative side of the social and cultural face of Mother Bharat. So, it naturally becomes anathema to caste Hindus

who are the chief spokespersons of Indian culture. I therefore feel that there is a need for a different kind of aesthetics for engaging with Dalit literature.

Dalit literature is the source material which could become the eye opener for social change. Socio-cultural parameters stand still in India as the ruling class and law makers turned a blind eye and deaf ear to Dalit literature and refused to listen to its voice, message and vision.

Even today, the Indian village is a cesspool of inequality and caste discrimination. Obviously, it is because of social ignorance and lack of awareness and political will to change it by the governing classes. We have only slogans on one side and the legislations on the other which are largely neglected. I would like to elaborate on this with a few incidents that took place in different parts of the country, not in the distant past but in the recent months, after sixty-eight years of independence.

1. In a government school of Mandi district in Himachal Pradesh, upper caste students refused to sit in the same row as Dalit students during mid-day meals.
2. In a recent survey conducted in Karnataka, it was found that in several schools, teachers themselves ask Dalit students to sit separately and assign menial jobs like cleaning toilets to them.
3. It is reported that Rajasthan University hostels are fostering divisions based on caste. Majority of its eighteen hostels are sharply divided on community lines like Jats, Gujjars, SCs, STs and Brahmins. A similar divide is seen in girls' hostels also. Here, Jats are a majority in Kasturba Hostel, Brahmins in Saraswati and SC students in Mahi Hostel.
4. On 19 September 2014, the last rites of a man at Mehlol village near Godhra taluka of Gujarat had to be conducted outside the crematorium after upper caste men objected to the cremation at the common place. It is a common factor in the whole of the country that Dalits are not only denied access to the common burial

grounds but are not even provided a separate place for burial. It is interesting to note that in a village in Beed district of Maharashtra, a dead body was taken to the national highway and a traffic jam was created with a view to get the police to come settle the issue.

5. At a wedding in Gugal Kota in Alwar on 21 June 2014, a Dalit groom was riding a decorated horse to the bride's home as per the prevailing custom. Rajputs in the village disliked such a celebration by a Dalit family and the groom was pulled down from the horse on the road and the guests were attacked.
6. In Virudhunagar of Tamil Nadu, a sixteen-year-old boy's wrist was cut by his upper caste seniors in the school simply because he was wearing a watch.
7. In a village of Karnataka, a barber's family was ostracised because he cut the hair of an untouchable Dalit.
8. In March 2011, a senior government official from SC community retired from service in Kerala. The next day, his chamber was cleansed by performing cleansing rituals by fellow officials.
9. In September 2014, a temple visited by Jitan Ram Manjhi, the Chief Minister of Bihar had also been cleansed by performing a similar ritual.
10. In Ahmedabad, no upper caste builder would sell a house to a Dalit. In fact, it is not easy for even an educated Dalit to get a house on rent in any of the urban centres, including Bengaluru.

This list can go on endlessly, reflecting how untouchability is senselessly practiced against Dalits and lower castes. These are examples of routine atrocities committed on vulnerable Dalit men and women. Rapes of women from Dalit and other marginalized communities are perceived and treated differently from rapes of upper caste women. This has very deep roots in the exploitative patriarchal practices of Hinduism through caste, an instance of which is distilled in the poem Bettale Seve:

The usual male priest
was praying to the deity – right, mother?
"The whole time I'm inside the sanctum,

the life in me is rotting away,
I have no entertainment," he said.

Ellamma appeared to him –
"Ask your heart's desire," she said.
"Once a year at your festival
the womenfolk should go naked
in your presence. The whole body
should be revealed to us,"
he replied.

"Granted," said Ellamma, and holding
her sari tight around her,
she climbed the hill.

In this way
an atrocity
was sanctioned by the gods and became
"service in the nude."

The humiliations and insults which Dalits face day in and day out are insurmountable. How do we explain cruelties like a Dalit boy being forced to eat human excreta and his genitals being burnt? Dalit writers cannot escape from the haunting injustice meted out to their brethren and chant hymns praising the Mother Goddess. All these factual realities of a violent caste ridden society form the crux of Dalit literature.

Apartheid could be removed because it was physical. The physical or racial identity with visible markers has a telling effect on the person at the receiving end of racial discrimination but this is not the case with caste. Being ethnically or racially undifferentiated, Dalits and others do not have distinct physical identities. A social intercourse between two similar individuals proceeds finely so long as one's caste is not known. Once it is revealed, the upper caste person is bound to withdraw on

some spurious pretext (exceptions are not ruled out, often by the people who have outgrown this obnoxious system). This is adding insult to injury, like salt sprinkled on a burning wound, because one is a Dalit and for no fault of his. Therefore, as Dr Ambedkar had pointed out: '*caste is not only notional, it is legal and penal*.' It is physical too, in a sense since it is related to the religiosity of a person. The religion which administers purity and pollution based on caste demands adherence to it. A Hindu hardly compromises with the caste rules although it is undemocratic, for fear of wrath of God.

Democracy and caste system cannot go together. They are like oil and water; they do not mix. Majoritarianism does not contribute to democracy in India. It is caste which gets masqueraded as majority and therefore this reign should be called, if I can coin it, as 'casteocracy.' With what pain Dr Ambedkar said, "In this country virtue has become caste ridden, morality has become caste bound, and charity begins with caste and ends with caste," cannot be easily comprehended.

Our country needs to consider untouchability and caste system as violation of human rights, instead of making mere legislations and punishing people at random. When our neighbouring country Nepal acceded to taking strict measures against untouchability and caste system in the UN, India denied it saying she has taken measures to solve it by making legislations. I hope India attempts washing the dirty linen in public before it stinks.

Any discussion on reservation for Dalits and other marginalised communities is met with abominable answers which are certainly out of wilful ignorance. Therefore, it is not enough to eulogise Ambedkar with a lesson or two, here and there, in the academic text books. It is through him the real India is explored and the idea of India is exposed. It is not too late, his writings and speeches besides Dalit writings should become part of syllabus at various levels and the growing young generation should be taught that the practice of caste system and untouchability is inhuman; not only that, it shows the country in poor light. It is only when the diabolical caste system is annihilated and

Babasaheb Ambedkar's dream is realised that this country can achieve Equality. A country with such rigid social, economic and cultural strata cannot hide it by boasting about progress and achievements. Social inequality and cultural poverty cannot be eradicated by sending rockets to other planets.

With this verse from a poem I had dedicated to Babasaheb Ambedkar, I wish everyone a happy 125th year anniversary celebration:

The sound that I make
does not deceive politely
or bury itself in the mouth –
it's a dazzling sword
brandished and
swung at earth.
The sound that I make
doesn't cool the eyes like sheet lightning –
like thunderbolts
it flashes
striking
all inhuman
systems
and conditions.

[The verses and poems in this article were translated by Prof Rowena Hill from the original Kannada version, they can be read at *The Shared Mirror* (http://roundtableindia.co.in/lit-blogs/).]

Remembering Those Who Taught How to Remember

Artist: Nidhin Shobhana

Ambedkar the Thinker: A Class Apart

Mahitosh Mandal

In 2015, I was admitted in Ruby Hospital, Kolkata, for my first ever surgery. I was spending a night at a hospital for the first time ever, and was overcome with loneliness and fear. On my tablet, I had a few writings of Dr Ambedkar. While surfing through them I opened 'Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development,' the research paper Ambedkar had presented in the Anthropology Conference of Columbia University in 1916. As I started reading the article, I found myself sitting, instead of lying, on the hospital bed. Within two hours, almost in one breath, I finished reading that short but enlightening text. Anthropology has always been a subject of my fascination. As a student, I had voraciously studied many renowned European anthropologists. Among them Claude Lévi-Strauss and Marcel Mauss were my favourites. But after encountering this valuable text by Ambedkar, I was convinced that this must be placed above all other anthropological texts I had studied. Not only this one text, but every single text of Ambedkar is brimming with knowledge, with blazing spirit.

Now the question is – why did I not encounter Ambedkar during my student-life? The answer is simple. No one had asked or encouraged me to read Ambedkar. I have never seen an entire course on Ambedkar offered in the list of courses I had to take, which was very necessary and still is. I have studied in some of the so-called premier educational institutions of West Bengal. I have always fared well, with first class, wherever I have studied. During my student life, I read many of the finest thinkers of the world and was always moved by them. But most of those thinkers were Europeans. We were made to think that India has not produced any Plato or Marx or Freud or Derrida. To some extent, that is true. But once I started reading Ambedkar, I realized that as a thinker, he was a class apart.

Educated and self-complacent, Bengalis are pathetically backdated

regarding Ambedkar studies. The continuing absence and exclusion of Ambedkar from English literature and Arts departments of acclaimed universities of West Bengal, where many of the world's thinking giants are taught, is nothing but part of a couched but well-planned politics. I have deliberately used the word 'politics' and one should not be astonished. Those who are accustomed to high API scores earned by delivering fiery lectures on 'Politics of Canon' should not make any objection to my choice of words. The politics behind the exclusion and negligence of Ambedkar's works is much more complex and deadly.

Ambedkar once said, "I am the most hated Indian." Those who hate Ambedkar have made it a point, in the past decades, that Ambedkar gets no place in the syllabi. The pundits who have designed the educational curriculum for the school education of Bengal have devoted two tiny paragraphs to Ambedkar and limited Ambedkar's story to his early experiences of untouchability in his own school. I was taught one such story in which his victimhood as an untouchable was narrated. This suggests that the sufferings of a Dalit are more attractive and exciting than his intellectual output for Bengali educationists.

That Ambedkar was a vehement critic of Hinduism to the extent that Gandhi called him a "challenge to Hinduism," that Ambedkar realized through his lived experience and intense research that Hinduism was completely opposed to the principles of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity – all these and such other radical ideas of Ambedkar have been systematically suppressed. It was Ambedkar alone who made the thousand-year-old Brahmin civilization face some difficult questions! What has Hinduism done for the welfare of the 'lower' castes? What well-being has it brought for women? What has this 'ancient' civilization done for the welfare of the Adivasis? In the name of religion and caste, Brahminism has divided the country into parts. Consequently, it has time and again fallen prey to foreign invaders. It is only natural that a person whose writings raise such uncomfortable questions will be hated in a brahminized society. If we have the aspiration and courage to build a bright and prosperous nation, the first step would be to investigate

and assess the history and politics of this hatred, a task which has not yet been initiated properly. Those who display their ardent zeal towards courses like 'Literature and Censorship' have no idea regarding the urgent need to study the history of suppression, non-publication and censorship of Ambedkar's writings. Such a study is imperative for the Bengali/Indian students.

Many of us know that hatred is related to anxiety. Ambedkar did not make baseless hue and cry against Hinduism, Brahmin Civilization or against the Hindus in general. He was a student of law. He never passed any irrelevant or unjustified remarks. Consequently, the alternative history of India that Ambedkar wrote (contradicting the official brahminical history) has potential to challenge the Hindu nation if it were to be accessed by young Indian students. When the British condemned the Hindus and their civilization, it was easy to argue that the foreigner-colonizers would naturally do so to establish their superiority. However, such excuses cannot be used to refute criticisms from Ambedkar; it is indeed difficult to accept criticisms from a person born in this very land, was on the receiving end of continuous casteist oppression since his birth, and who, despite all that, made himself one the finest thinkers of the world. If young students start reading Ambedkar's radical thoughts seriously, then the nationwide brahminical Empire, enveloping the fields of Academics, Politics, Economy, Media, Literature, Cinema, and so on, will eventually fall apart. Once Ambedkar is understood deeply, the dream to build the 'Hindu Raj' will be shattered. Those would not be very happy times. Hence, this anxiety! Hence, the politics of Ambedkar's elimination!

Ambedkar knew these Hindutvavadis and brahminists, as we say, bone to bone. Hence towards the end, he used to keep several typed copies of his writings fearing the destruction of his works. He also knew that only writings and speeches would not fulfil his purpose. Social change required further concrete actions, and for that, it was necessary to materialize the 'philosophy of praxis.' Out of many such activities, one was his drafting of the Indian Constitution. He legitimized the concept

of 'representation' within the Constitution. He had to battle and triumph over many arguments and debates for this cause. He vehemently stated that those who have suffered, and thus have been marginalized, for thousands of years, in the hands of the brahminists must be given the right to live with self-respect and in dignified human conditions. Not only did he speak about the economic marginalization of Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasis, but he also talked about social and cultural marginalization. Therefore, the so-called 'reservation' is not meant for those deprived of 'financial capital' but for the socially backward communities lacking 'cultural capital' as well. Obviously, due to the incessant hatred and anxiety of brahminical castes, the actual positive dynamics of reservation has been suppressed.

Of course, there are relative differences between the caste system as it is practised today, and the caste system hundred years back. However, the well-planned nation-wide anti-reservation propaganda that we witness today is nothing but casteism in disguise. Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasis are still facing physical and psychological persecution, and that is casteism. In the elite academic circles of West Bengal, when people leer and sneer whenever the word 'caste' is uttered, or try to cloak the word 'caste' with the word 'class,' it is a manifestation of casteism. Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi students and teachers being neglected and harassed across universities and institutions of West Bengal is today's form of casteism. The so-called 'atheist' student organizations of West Bengal that indulge in 'hero worship' of teachers, the heroes unmistakably hailing from brahminical background, are also practicing casteism. Kindly, do not babble your fetish of 'merit' here. Even though they were apparently excessively 'merited,' for thousands of years, the Brahmins could not produce a single Plato or Marx or Freud or Derrida in this wretched land. If dependence on these 'meritorious' Brahmins continue, India would eternally remain a third world country. Ambedkar is a challenge to all these 'meritorious' Indians, for, though not hailing from brahmin quarters, he stands apart as the most original thinker of India and it is he who has made history as an original thinker.

Though I have stated that Ambedkar has made history, the brahmin-savarna Bengalis are ignorant of this fact. Such ignorance has given birth to prejudice even among the 'educated' class. The same professor who lectures on the 'other' or 'marginality' or the 'role of the intellectual' in the classroom and thus is hero-worshipped, wittingly or unwittingly discriminates against the students and colleagues from the 'reserved categories.' Yet, the responsibility of particularly uplifting the 'backward' students along with educating others rest in the hands of these very teachers. They evade their obligation towards a large section of the society by making the excuse of 'merit.' Their nepotism with the so-called meritorious students is remarkable, even though historically, merit has been never a quality that is handily available to pick up from pygmy trees.

Those deprived of cultural capital undoubtedly have the capacity to flourish if they are provided with cultural capital. The brahminists have always been adept at the practice of monopolizing cultural capital. The same brahminical tradition continues even today. Hence, the shift from tradition to modernity requires active resistance to brahminism and Hindutvavad. Ambedkar's writings can be an effective weapon in this resistance.

Even though I am advocating the need to 'return to Ambedkar,' I am well convinced that the supercilious 'upper' caste Bengalis will never touch Ambedkar. They are of medieval mentality, how much ever progressive credentials they claim. Also, touching Ambedkar poses a great risk of losing their caste. Ambedkar too understood this very well. He has once mentioned that educating the brahminical upper castes is not his responsibility. His task was to use the alternative histories to make the Dalit people aware of their rights, to organize them and to take them forward. It is precisely for this reason that Ambedkar needs to be taken to the Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi communities. Ambedkar will be their means for self-assertion. Only then, will the discourse of 'Educate, Agitate and Organize' be materialized. The 'backward' classes will move forward from margins to the centre. The nation will see

inclusive, all-round development.

In fact, the only condition for teaching and studying Ambedkar is to be able to nourish the ambition for the comprehensive progress of the nation and of the world. After all, Ambedkar was a thinker. He has shown us what it means to nourish such an ambition and how to materialize the same. We must remind ourselves that Ambedkar could have made a career staying back in America, given the kind of high educational qualification he had. But he was determined to work for his people, for the country. He did not write for the Dalits alone, he also wrote for the non-Hindus, women, and for the Adivasi-Bahujans. He has given the call for transcending hypocrisy, and the dehumanizing strategies of caste Hindus.

He wanted to unite people of this land by annihilating the discrimination and oppression pervasive in our social and political structures. He believed that India has yet to become a 'nation.' To determine whether India can become a nation at all, he has made precise analyses of not only the history of India but also of the world. And in all these discourse and analyses, he has moved freely across disciplines – Law, Economics, Religion, Philosophy, Anthropology, History, Literature, Science and many other fields. In this context, his idea of Marx's inapplicability in India deserves special mention. And if India ever intends to take pride in any of its thinkers it will undoubtedly be Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar.

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This article, a speech delivered on 16 April 2016 at an event to celebrate Dr Ambedkar organized by Duttapukur Ambedkar Welfare Society, West Bengal, has been translated from Bengali by ***Pinak Banik.***
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Forgotten History of Ambedkar's Political School

Dr Shiv Shankar Das

At a time when the whole world is in the mood to celebrate the 125th birth anniversary of Dr B. R. Ambedkar, it is also essential to deliberate on the institutions which he cherished. He wanted to build a strong institutional foundation as a support base to drive the further course of action of movements, and be the guiding light for the next generation. However, this task remains unaccomplished even sixty years after his death. One such institution that the Ambedkarite movement has forgotten is Dr Ambedkar's Political School, which is hardly known even to his staunch followers. This school was founded to train upcoming leaders in politics but it died an orphan's death with Ambedkar's demise. July 1, 2016, marks the completion of sixty years of Dr Ambedkar's efforts to open a Political School in India to train future leaders in the practical field of politics. Yet, we do not find even a single event related to this school anywhere in the entire world.

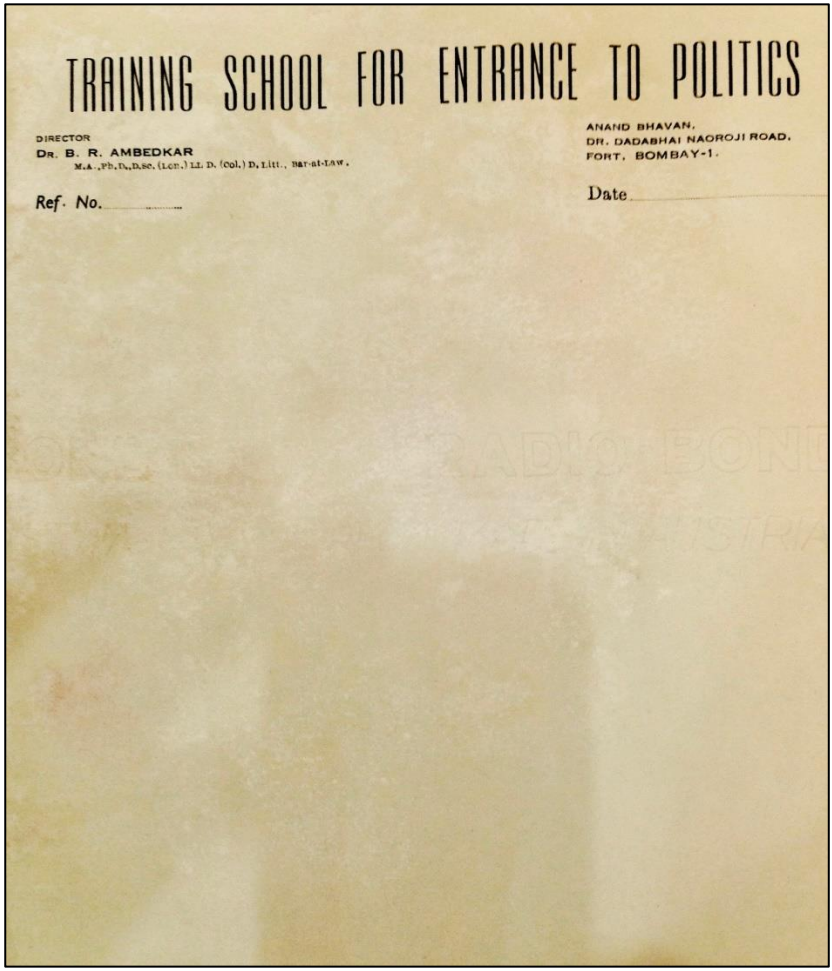
The school was established in July 1956 in Mumbai, India, and was named as the 'Training School for Entrance to Politics.' The first and last batch of the school consisted of fifteen students. Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar was the Director, and his close associate Shri S.S. Rege was the Registrar of the school. It was functional only for nine months, from July 1956 to March 1957, and was shut down after Ambedkar's demise. Ambedkar was in search of a Principal for the school – someone personable, well informed in one's subjects, and a good orator. He was scheduled to visit the school on 10th December, 1956, to address the trainees on oratory skills, which he could not do as he passed away on December 6th that year.

The cherished objective of the school was to train upcoming political leaders by inculcating a Buddhist outlook in them, in their knowledge *(pradhnya),* and their character *(sheel).* He envisioned training them in different subjects of social sciences and character-building, and also

equipping them with the knowledge of parliamentary legislative procedures - which is a very basic function of legislators (political leaders). Ambedkar had this deliberate vision for emerging legislators. If candidates contest and win elections - but were not trained to understand the problems of their own constituencies, and know how to effectively bring them under the law-making process, or possess the art of speaking in legislative houses - then the purpose of being true representatives would not be served in our democracy.

Although there were many schools of thought to study politics during his time, this school was unique and was the only place where leaders could be trained for practical work in politics. Dhananjay Keer, a known biographer of Ambedkar writes, "The school was meant for those who cherished the ambition of joining the legislature, and it was the first of its kind in the country." Thus, it was a huge stepping-stone laid by him for the cause of making politics accessible to the marginalised groups, by providing them with education and training on many related skills.

The tragic history of the school was that though it was started, it died a premature death in less than a year, while the Republican Party of India (RPI) - which was just a proposal - was received as a celebrated idea by the so-called Ambedkarites for their emancipation. The deliberative thoughts of Ambedkar to invigorate democratic forces in India through leadership development by the school were completely sacrificed in the celebratory mood of the founding fathers of various sects of RPI. The difference between Ambedkar's perspective and that of the Ambedkarites is important to highlight here.


TRAINING SCHOOL FOR ENTRANCE TO POLITICS

DIRECTOR
DR. B. R. AMBEDKAR
M.A., Ph.D., D.Sc. (Lon.) LL.D. (Col.) D.Litt., Bar-at-Law.

ANAND BHAVAN,
DR. DADABHAI NAOROJI ROAD,
FORT, BOMBAY-1.

Ref. No.

Date

Letter head with Babasaheb Ambedkar's name

Whereas for Ambedkar, the school was an entry point into the proposed political party (RPI), the people active in RPI politics visualised practical politics without such a Political School. So, without understanding Ambedkar's philosophy and method of politics, the overenthusiastic politicians (it may not be proper to call them leaders) underestimated or neglected Ambedkar's vision behind the Political

School. As time passed, neither any faction of RPI, nor any other political group such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) - who claim themselves to be the carriers of Ambedkar's legacy - valued it. Thus, the objective of the Political School to be a supplier of true leadership in Political Parties was ignored, neglected and undervalued. Ambedkar's idea of the Political School is completely blacked out in the academic domain as well.

To conclude, I would like to say that after the complete silence for the last six decades since Ambedkar's death, as well as the death of his Political School, it is a matter of contemplation for Ambedkarite people to think seriously about two things: 1) Why did Ambedkar think of establishing the Political School towards the end of his life, despite establishing so many formal educational institutions earlier? 2) Had not Ambedkar somewhere foreseen the limitations of the political parties in bringing about genuine representation and democratic political change in India – limitations which could have been mediated through the Political School?

From this small note of mine on Dr Ambedkar's Political School, I appeal to the Ambedkarite community across the world, to come forward and discuss this idea on different platforms and work for the revival of this school immediately. In India, the very first event to discuss this idea in detail is scheduled on 1st July, 2016 in Nagpur (Maharashtra), organized by the Public Leadership Forum (PLF). In this programme, the challenges and future strategies for this school would be chalked out. To get updates about the programme, kindly visit the website of the forum: https://www.plfindia.org.

Babasaheb, You, have been Betrayed

Kurukhetra Dip

"Gandhiji, I have no homeland," said Babasaheb Ambedkar during the 1930s when India was struggling for freedom from the British. Babasaheb further says,

How can I call this land my own homeland and this religion my own, wherein we are treated worse than cats and dogs, wherein we cannot get water to drink? No self-respecting Untouchable worth the name will be proud of this land. The injustice and sufferings inflicted upon us by this land are so enormous that if knowingly or unknowingly we fall a prey to disloyalty to this country, the responsibility for that act would be solely hers.[25]

In another instance, Babasaheb reiterates the same thing with a deeper meaning:

Man has a body as well as a mind. He needs physical as well as mental freedom. Mere physical freedom is of no use. Freedom of the mind is of prime importance. Really speaking, what is meant to a man by physical freedom? It means he is free to act according to his own free will. A prisoner is unchained and is set free. What is the principle underlying this? The principle is, he should be free to act according to his free will, and he should be able to make the maximum use of the abilities he possesses. But what is the use of such freedom of a man whose mind is not free? The freedom of mind is the real freedom.[26]

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[25] From the exchange between Gandhi and Ambedkar, to be found here: www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/timeline/graphics/gandhi1931.html

[26] From *What Path to Salvation?* Speech delivered by Dr Ambedkar to the Bombay Presidency Mahar Conference on 31 May 1936 at Bombay. Full text here to be found online here:

In other words, Ambedkar's struggle was not merely for freedom for the land. His struggle was for freedom from the clutches of all kinds of slavery and oppression. It was freedom for human liberation. Today, the country is witnessing everything that Ambedkar had said.

Babasaheb was fully aware that Hinduism will never leave its core philosophy, howsoever much it contradicts the Indian constitution. Ironically, the hard Hindu, the soft Hindu, the progressive Hindu, and the Left Hindus successfully managed to accommodate Hinduism in democracy. The principles ingrained in the Indian Constitution are the biggest challenge to Indian society. But Babasaheb's stand on many serious issues was ethically and morally sound. Citizens, leaders, academicians, political parties and his opponents cannot wish it away. Astonishingly, all of them accept him today for various reasons – for their self-interest, for vote bank politics or for other genuine reasons.

The truth is that today, even if one may not agree with him, Ambedkar remains indispensable. The questions which were raised by Ambedkar on nation and nationalism, unity of the country, danger of Hinduism, democracy, reservation, equality, annihilation of caste, women's liberation, democratic socialism, equal distribution of resources, education and so on, find genuine resonance even today. His warning on Hinduism is a superb example. In his analysis, it is Hinduism that has created all the problems. To him, *"a people and their Religion must be judged by social standards based on social ethics. No other standard would have any meaning if religion is held to be a necessary good for the well-being of the people."* Who is responsible for this calamity? Unfortunately, by default, all are Hindu today, except other religious minorities.

Today Ambedkar is politicized. He is politicized by all his opponents, and he is politicized by stooges. It is also a fact that Ambedkar is seen as a Dalit leader. He is stigmatized and ghettoized as a caste leader. The most important issue taken up by Ambedkar was caste discrimination.

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http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/txt_ambedkar_salvation.html

Dalits, who constitute twenty percent of the total population, face caste violence and continue to suffer on an everyday basis. But it never becomes a national or international issue. Let us interrogate a current issue, that of Rohith Vemula's death. While Rohith's death exposed the brahminical conspiracy in higher educational institutions, hooligan nationalism killed the spirit of the issue.

Members of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) respond very seriously when it comes to anti-nationalism or freedom of speech, but strangely, we did not find a similar approach in the case of Rohith. This comparison is not to show narrow casteist mindsets, but one cannot deny the reality that appears before us. Political organizations can do politics on behalf of Rohith, but cannot bring justice to Rohith. Rohith is no more today and the cause lives on, in rhetoric but not in concrete terms. Brahminism has entrenched itself in such a way that upper castes live in ambiguity about the cause of Dalits. This is because caste is deeply intrinsic to Indian life and that reflects in the struggles as well. Therefore, the suffering of Dalits remains confined to Dalits. In their fight, it may seem like only their struggle is genuine, however it is a fight against inhumanity and anyone can join in it.

The self-proclaimed progressive left has disregarded Ambedkar's core idea. The left has been alleging that Ambedkar is a liberal democratic constitutionalist. The point raised by the left must be interrogated by raising a counter question. In the last one century of left in India, nowhere have they criticized the Hindu religion. They do not see Hindu religion as a major threat to bringing in communism. Who is responsible for fascist Hindutva today? Has it ever been raised by the left in their political discourse? There is no hope that the left would stand to destroy Hinduism in the future.

In this context, who is the real liberal, left or Ambedkar? To put it differently, who upholds Hinduism to create a binary of communalism and secularism? To further this argument, how can a left activist worship Hindu Gods the same way as the right wing does? Is this a

secular and communist practice? The answer lies in understanding Indian society and its problems.

Ambedkar strongly believed that the constitution is a normative document, which will bring qualitative change in the society. However, there are limitations in the constitution. Let us question the praxis of left and right by asking - do they regard the Indian constitution as a guiding principle? According to the left, constitution is a liberal bourgeois document while the right says it is a violent constitution, which prohibits all religious performances. In a way, both share a kind of totalitarian vision or find it easy to accept the praxis of Hinduism. The Constitution is a document that provides a framework to work with, for seeking social justice.

Babasaheb Ambedkar, you are great in so many ways, and stay relevant in contemporary India. Your importance is present in every sphere of life. You are the real saviour, revolutionary, visionary, path, and destiny. What would be India today, if you had not played a key role in your lifetime? I believe that people of this country are realizing your struggle as time passes. You will be alive for a long time to come, because you have fought for freedom of humanity, not freedom of land.

Thank You, Babasaheb

Gurinder Azad

Thank You, Babasaheb!
Because you were
We today are able to
Reclaim our human dignity

Their caste arrogance notwithstanding
It is now settled once and for all
That equality isn't offered on a platter
The stream of respect doesn't gush forth from any vedas

Absurd it is
To sleep in the hope
That a different world would dawn
That all will be gradually well
Somehow on its own

Some issues aren't even worthy of debate
Like justice offered as some concession
Like the chants of humanity spouting forth from vedic mouths

Some compromises are just not possible
Like with saffron ideology

Which in the name of development
Ruins entire forests
Shocks all humanity

Some battles concern the roots
Are inked to the land
Are moulded and toughened with integrity

Today, with all this,
We have much to reckon with

Thank You, Babasaheb
That I am able to pen these words
Like war drums rolling!

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This poem has been translated from Hindi by ***Akshay Pathak.***
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Authors, Translators, Artists, Editors

Akhil Kang is a human rights lawyer-researcher currently based in New Delhi. He graduated from NALSAR University of Law, Hyderabad. He writes/works on issues related to caste-sexuality and is associated with the Queering Dalit collective. He writes about queer sex/desires at http://desi-underground-gay.blogspot.in/

Akshay Pathak is a writer and researcher based in Jaipur. He loves Punjabi songs and the poetry of Kabir.

Arvind Bouddh is a graduate from IIT Bombay and believes in egalitarianism.

Bansidhar Deep is a Research Scholar at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, and a core committee Member of UDSF and is associated with BAPSA.

Chandana Chandragiri is doing her masters in psychology at Ambedkar University and is interested in studying the relationship between caste and mental health.

Dr Chetana Sawai, Assistant professor at Dr Ambedkar College of social work, Wardha, is also a social activist.

Dr Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy is a poet and writer and a noted public speaker. He is a vocal advocate for eradicating the caste system, the inhuman practice of untouchability and against fundamentalism. Poetry is his passion but he has worked in other genres of literature as well, besides having a wide range of interests in social work, theatre and cinema. He has brought out thirty-three books so far which include 6 collections of poetry. His poetry, translated into Spanish by Rowena Hill as *Poemas: Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy*, has been published by the Venezuelan Goverment (CONAC) in 2005 under World Poetry Series. He has been a participant at many International Poetry conferences. He recently presented a paper on *Dalit Literature in*

translation and read his poems at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, England conducted by AHRC in June 2015. More recently, his poetry *Before It Rains Again* translated by Rowena Hill has been published by erbacce Press, Liverpool, England in 2016.

Dr Shiv Shankar Das holds a PhD in Political Science from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Gouri Patwardhan is an Artist and Filmmaker currently based in Bangalore. Gouri's experience as a film maker and editor began with making educational films for children and young adults for NCERT and UGC on themes of art, environment and inventive pedagogical practices, after graduating from Goa College of Art and a post graduate diploma from Film and Television Institute of India, Pune. Her recent independently produced documentary, *Modikhanyachya Don Goshti* (Two Tales of Modikhana) explores an urban Dalit Bahujan neighbourhood through the artistic lens of two Dalit artists. Gouri is currently working on a documentary looking at how culture and heritage is constructed in the urban context of Pune.

Gurinder Azad is a bilingual (Hindi and Punjabi) poet, writer, translator, filmmaker, and human rights activist. *Conditions Apply* is his first book of Hindi poetry.

Kanika Sori is a biotech engineer from IIT Roorkee and currently based in Delhi.

Kurukhetra Dip is a Senior Research Scholar at Centre for the Study of Social System, Jawaharlal Nehru University whose areas of interest are Disability Studies, Social Theory, Methods and Methodology, Sociology of Education and Social Movements.

Lakshmi Parvathy did her integrated masters in Development Studies and is currently working as a Young Professional Fellow. She is interested in issues of Development Philosophy, Gender and Social Justice.

Madhura Raut is currently doing MA in Gender,Culture & Development from Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule Women's Studies Centre, Savitribai Phule Pune University Pune.

Mahitosh Mandal is Assistant Professor at the Department of English, Presidency University, Kolkata. His areas of interest include Dalit Studies, Hinduism, and Psychoanalysis.

Nidhin Shobhana, a research scholar at Jawaharlal Nehru University, is an artist and a writer.

Nilesh Kumar has done his MA in Medieval History from JNU and PG Diploma in International Human Rights, Humanitarian and Refugee Law from the Indian Society of International Law.

Pinak Banik is a visual artist and independent researcher from West Bengal. His areas of interest are Socio-cultural Historiography, Political economy, Anthropology, Art and Society. He can be reached at imrealartist@gmail.com

Pradnya Jadhav is a research scholar at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Pradnya Mangala holds a MSc degree in Environmental Sciences from Institute of Science and a Diploma in Disaster Management from TISS.

Pragya Chouhan is an IT professional working for a multinational IT company in Hyderabad. She belongs to a small town called Balaghat in Madhya Pradesh. She did her masters in Computer Science. Currently, she is pursuing masters in Psychology and Masters in NLP and practicing online socio-psychological counselling.

Rahi Gaikwad is a Mumbai-based journalist.

Rahul Sonpimple is a research scholar at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, JNU, New Delhi.

Ravindra Kumar Goliya is Assistant Prof at Jaypee University of Engineering and Technology, Guna, Madhya Pradesh.

Ruia Prasad is an undergraduate student majoring in biology and South Asia studies and is interested in the history of medicine in India, caste and gender in the framework of reproductive health, and critical medical anthropology.

Saurav Arya is the Founder of Impressive Graphics. A Digital Nomad. And on a mission to visit every country.

Sirra Gagarin, IRTS, is the Chief Executive Officer, Hassan Mangalore Rail Development Co., Bangalore.

Sruthi Herbert recently submitted her doctoral thesis at SOAS, University of London and teaches undergraduate students there. She is also a co-editor at SAVARI (www.dalitweb.org).

Suravee Nayak is currently pursuing PhD at Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum and is interested in political economy, dispossession, gender and caste.

Suresh R V is from Chennai and is an engineering graduate from Anna University.

Swati Kamble is a Dalit women's rights activist, presently doing a PhD in Socio-economics at the University of Geneva on caste and gender inequalities in policy processes in India.

Syama Sundar Unnamati hails from Vijayawada. He has an MA in English Literature from Pondicherry University, and is pursuing PhD from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi after this MA in History and MPhil there. Initially, he used to draw cartoons for college magazines but when Facebook became popular, upon the advice of friends, he started posting them online. Dalit literature and Dr Ambedkar's writings exerted a strong influence on him. Therefore, Ambedkarite ideology and anger is markedly reflected in his art work.

Currently, he is teaching Indian History to graduate students in Vijayawada.

Vinay Shende is working in the Corporate Sector and follower of Phule-Ambedkar philosophy.

WHAT BABASAHEB AMBEDKAR MEANS TO ME

Celebrating Babasaheb's life and achievements needs no particular occasion, he has emerged as a consciousness, a moral anchor for the masses. A musical tradition of rendering his life events from birth onwards, winding through Mahad, Poona Pact, Kalaram Mandir, Round Table conferences, the constitution itself, the conversion and his death was the foremost in the archiving of Babasaheb's memory and multiple legacies. This people's music in turn inspired artists, painters, writers and sculptors resulting in a vibrant visual rendering by people historians–men, women, young and old, who weave a tapestry of universal values of justice, equality, liberty and fraternity.

In a society that excludes at every turn, the excluded have claimed the public sphere with the physical shape of a bust or statue of Babasaheb. Can we even begin to fathom the processes that lead to seeing this physical manifestation of Babasaheb's consciousness at narrow street corners and busy market places.

On his 125th birth anniversary, in the act of remembering Babasaheb Ambedkar, The Shared Mirror invited young writers to send in articles on the theme of *'What Babasaheb Ambedkar Means to Me'*.

How do we embrace our roles in annihilating caste to create the foundation of a humane society? How do we celebrate his legacy and join his followers as workers laboring for an equal world?

The collection of essays in this book captures the writers' thinking on visions for a better and just world through their engagement with Babasaheb Ambedkar. As an eminent writer, thinker, statesman and a formidable symbol of resistance, he occupies a position of highest integrity. It is a book that will make readers think with the writers: Is Ambedkar an idea or an ideal? Is he a path or a journey? The readers get to engage in the dynamic process of viewing personal struggles alongside a benchmark of lofty human values, seen and understood through his incorruptible persona in life, words and accomplishments.

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